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WARRING FICTIONS: CULTURAL POLITICS  
AND THE VIETNAM WAR NARRATIVE

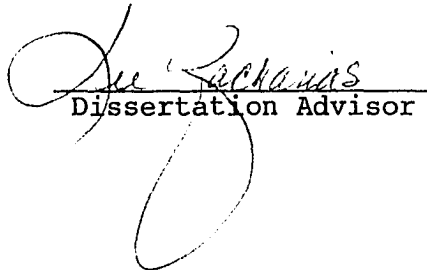
By

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Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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In the narrative prose of the Vietnam War--specifically Graham Greene's The Quiet American, Tim O'Brien's The Things They Carried, Philip Caputo's A Rumor of War, and Bobbie Ann Mason's In Country--as well as in the critical responses to this prose, two vital facts about the war have been overlooked. (1) Concentrating on the American experience, authors and critics have demonstrated an ignorance of and indifference toward the suffering of the Vietnamese; and (2) by focusing on the individual experiences of veterans, these writers have failed to place the war within the framework of U.S. imperialism and global capitalism. Despite critics' frequent assertions about its radical aesthetics and anti-war politics, the narrative prose of the Vietnam War has consistently neglected both the commercial/geopolitical motivation behind and the dreadful consequences of the Vietnam War.

Far from neutral, these omissions have occurred during a time of right-wing political ascendancy and resurgent militarism (a period that has been witness to a concerted attempt to revoke the activist political legacy of the 1960s). Thus, American literary culture has not effectively challenged, and in many ways has reinforced, a

conservative rewriting of the war, transforming a nearly genocidal war against the Vietnamese into an American tragedy.

My aim in this dissertation is not only to demonstrate the hegemonic workings of the dominant political culture within Vietnam War literature but to identify in a specific and detailed way some of the history that has been distorted and omitted from these texts. This dissertation, then, is as much an attempt to provide an alternative history of the Vietnam War as it is an examination of its literary representations.



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For my father, a veteran of wars foreign and domestic.

In history, the man in the ruffled shirt and gold-laced waistcoat somehow levitates above the blood he has ordered spilled by dirty-handed underlings.

--Frances Jennings

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## CHAPTER 1

## MANUFACTURING CANONS

The function of criticism should have been, in our time, as in all times, to maintain and to demonstrate the special, unique, and complete knowledge which great forms of literature afford us.

--Allen Tate

There is just no sense in pondering the function of literature without relating it to the actual society that uses it, to the centers of power within that society, and to the institutions that mediate between literature and people.

--Richard Ohmann1

Twenty years ago helicopters lifted off the roof of the U.S. embassy in Saigon, carrying with them the last American combat servicemen in Vietnam. Since then a generation has come of age without contemporaneous knowledge of the war. For this generation the war is understood through documentary footage, popular films and television shows, novels and personal memoirs and history texts. To the extent that a consensus understanding of the war exists, it has been shaped by the mass media. Literary representations have been a minor (though not inconsequential) influence upon the shaping of American cultural memory of the war. Nonetheless, an examination of critically acclaimed Vietnam War narratives can serve several

purposes--it can identify something of the process by which contemporary literature achieves canonical status and, in showing the ideological constraints at work within this process, can suggest the manner in which ideological hegemony is reinforced by cultural artifacts. Considering that Vietnam War literature has appeared during an era of resurgent militarism and right-wing ascendancy and that it has developed simultaneously with the so-called culture wars (the struggle, between views like Tate's and Ohmann's, over literary/cultural authority), such a critical examination can reveal the extent to which contemporary literature and revisionist literary culture have challenged prevailing views of American motive and policy in Vietnam.

#### American Literary Culture

When I began my undergraduate study of American literature in the mid-1970s--at the same time that the U.S. was removing its last troops from Vietnam--there still existed a general agreement about the texts and the intellectual currents that comprised American literature. This literature was understood through a rough narrative history that began with the Puritans, ran through Jonathan Edwards and Benjamin Franklin, continued with the transcendentalists, realists, and naturalists, and concluded with the modernists--Frost, Stevens, Eliot, Pound, Fitz-

gerald, Hemingway, and Faulkner. There were occasional courses covering works that did not fit this outline, but these were considered peripheral to an understanding of American literature and to the cultural literacy requirements of a general undergraduate education.

The problem with this traditional canon, as has been frequently discussed in recent years, was that it enshrined not the best that had been written and thought, but those works best suited to examination by the dominant critical method--New Criticism. New Critics viewed their formalist methods as key to identifying and explicating great literature. When, for instance, David Daiches declared he measured literary value by the "degree to which the work len[t] itself to [New Critical methods]" (303), he meant to suggest the inherent sympathy between formalist literary criticism and literary value, not the specific and contingent nature of New Criticism.

The problem with New Criticism was three-fold: first, its biases led to the creation of a literary canon that (in terms of race, class, and gender) was unrepresentative; second, it denied canonicity to authors and texts that were overtly ideological since these did not fit formalist notions of literary value; and third, it downplayed the ideological content of those works that were granted canonical status. By concentrating on texts that fit their critical framework, New Critics often excluded

from serious consideration works that foregrounded social concerns. A text's ability to analyze, critique, and challenge social injustice and economic inequality, to denaturalize ideologically reaffirming myths, and to give voice to the powerless and the exploited was extraneous and non-literary. In the traditional American literary canon, genuinely radical or alternative discourse was uncommon. When such discourse was included, it was either misread or viewed (as in the cases of Thoreau and Melville) as idiosyncratic rather than as part of a radical literary and social tradition. The result of New Critical hegemony was "to denigrate the democratic content in American literature, to smother its traditional note of social protest," and, writes Alexander Karanikas, "to elevate in its stead new literary gods and canons more acceptable to the rightist tradition" (viii).

This is not to suggest that American literary culture was uncritical of this nation's long history of intolerance, exploitation, and violence. Criticism of these and other aspects of American life has been a dominant theme in American letters. But this critique has often overlooked the systemic roots of social ills, collapsing into a celebration of individualism and American idealism. Given the nationalist mythos underlying the American literary canon, the cold war climate in which formalism flourished, and the cultural authority accorded New Crit-

ics, it is not surprising that their critique was so circumscribed. After all, as Gerald Graff and Bruce Robbins ask, "how was culture . . . to be at once the essential expression of the national consensus and a profound critique of the national consensus?" (424). Truly, this critique has never been profound and has been little more than, in Nina Baym's words, a "consensus criticism of the consensus" ("Melodramas" 69). Barbara Herrnstein Smith likewise asserts the narrow range of critique within mainstream literary culture:

However much canonical works may be seen to "question" secular vanities such as wealth, social position, and political power, "remind" their readers of more elevated values and virtues, and oblige them to "confront" such hard truths and harsh realities as their own mortality or the hidden griefs of obscure people, they would not be found to please long and well if they were seen to undercut establishment interests radically or to subvert the ideologies that support them effectively. (51)

The critique of American culture found in canonical literature has been uncritical of numerous ideological presuppositions, has been made from within a framework of liberal capitalism and U.S. nationalism, and has itself regularly denied sanction to those works that make a more radical critique of establishment beliefs and practices.<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, during the past several years the literary canon has been recognized as elitist and exclusionary, and much effort has been devoted to transforming it



through the incorporation of previously marginalized writers. Likewise, the themes and literary aesthetics of these writers and the traditions out of which they wrote have become familiar concerns for teachers and scholars. However welcome the broadening of the American literary canon may be, though, it does not represent the challenge to ideological hegemony alleged by its proponents and bemoaned by its detractors. By "hegemony" I mean what Richard Ohmann (after Antonio Gramsci) describes as

a whole way of life including culture and ideas far more subtle and effective than naked force . . . which effectively enlists almost everyone in the 'party' of the ruling class, sets limits to debate and consciousness, and in general serves as a means of rule--that is, of preserving and reproducing class structure. (8)

Such hegemony is not seriously challenged by multiculturalism, since its proponents invoke familiar and ideologically reaffirming notions of liberal pluralism and U.S. nationalism.<sup>3</sup> Thus for Henry Louis Gates multiculturalism "represents the very best hope for us, collectively, to forge a new, and vital, common American culture" (Loose xvii) Although the broadening of the canon and the questioning of canonicity itself represent long overdue challenges to an unrepresentative body of literature and a narrow concept of literary value, such radical-sounding projects have led to a more inclusive discussion of culture without examining how this more diverse culture sup-

ports the prevailing American ideology of liberal pluralism. For all its ostensible radicalism, the social critique made by revisionist American literary studies fails to address the systemic causes of social injustice and economic exploitation and thus reproduces, albeit in the marginal realm of literary studies, an individualist (and sometimes essentialist) ethos and a nationalist ideology.

Rather than a neutral means by which ideology is conveyed, American literary culture is itself an ideological structure. The two arms of literary culture--the publishing industry and the education system--are embedded within the capitalist system and, although perceiving themselves to be open to multiple and competing viewpoints, actually function to perpetuate class inequality.<sup>4</sup> Which is not to say that canonical literature has been valued for how closely it parrots capitalist/nationalist/liberal pluralist ideologies. On the contrary, texts that uncritically promote these beliefs often are considered crass and naive. To be canonized a text instead must criticize the dominant culture. The apparent paradox here--that canonical literature is both an embodiment and a critique of the dominant culture--is central to liberal pluralist ideology. The freedom and willingness to be self-critical, to challenge one's own convictions, is thought a hallmark of liberalism. This perception ignores the limited nature of liberalism's self-critique--its failure to examine under-

lying presuppositions such as individualism, capitalism, and American exceptionalism. So while it is true that in order to be canonized literary works must be critical of the dominant culture (and it is for this reason that literary culture often is attacked by the right), this criticism must be modest and ultimately ineffectual; it must not seriously challenge the basic beliefs upon which liberal pluralism rests.

In recognizing both this liberal hegemony and the inherent bias of the traditional canon, and in attempting to revise the canon, current scholars have sought to influence and perhaps refashion American culture itself. Inspired by contemporary theory's recognition that truth and knowledge are contingent, are socially and linguistically constructed, these scholars have viewed culture in its many forms as relatively autonomous (as opposed to the determinist base/superstructure model of classical Marxism), as a site of struggle for representation by various groups and subcultures. This "contemporary theoretical revolution" is grounded in, according to Stuart Hall, "the notion that the arena or medium in which ideology functions is one of signification, representation, discursive practices" (qtd. in Berube, Public Access 142). Many contemporary literary and cultural scholars thus see a correlation between the dominant culture's sanctioning of previously excluded literary works and traditions and its com-

mitment to social justice. The underlying belief of canon revision seems to be that if the canon can be made to give voice to the broad variety of American culture, so may the society at large be refashioned.

Seeking to revise American literary culture without attempting to overturn its economic configurations or its structures of power, revisionist literary studies does little more than put a representative gloss on an unrepresentative and exploitative system. For the writers and texts included within the revised canon and the critical approaches sanctioned by the academic establishment have endorsed an identity politics and have seen resistance in terms of cultural or gender difference rather than ideological solidarity. The problem with this position, according to Peter Osborne,

is that it tends to reduce radical politics to the expression of oppressed subjectivities, and thereby to lead to the construction of moralistic, and often simply additive, 'hierarchies of oppression,' whereby the political significance attributed to the views of particular individuals is proportional to the sum of their oppressions. Such a tendency both positively encourages a fragmentation of political agency and harbours the danger of exacerbating conflicts between oppressed groups. It also makes group demands readily recuperable by the competitive interest-group politics of a liberal pluralism (216-17).

Also, the revision of literary studies, which views knowledge as a discursive practice, equates the textual with the social and in so doing underestimates the practical

impediments to social change. And while multiculturalism may seem to defy the homogenizing effects of acculturation, it has done so largely within the framework of the American literary canon and thus attempts to maintain cultural integrity without systematically challenging--and often through supporting--the very force that has marginalized and exploited minority cultures: U.S. nationalism. However discrete and heterogenous, these marginalized texts, traditions, and cultures are set within an American context. The criticism of American culture made within these texts is reminiscent of the narrow and uncritical self-criticism of liberal pluralism. The ease with which these previously marginalized works have been embraced by the publishing industry<sup>5</sup> and incorporated into school curriculums suggests their modest critiques and reformist aims.

That revisionist study and reconstruction of the American literary canon falls within the parameters of liberal pluralism is to be expected. Academic literary study, after all, is itself a bourgeois institution and part of a larger structure meant to reproduce existing social relations through the training of an educated class. For Richard Ohmann,

bodies of knowledge and the people (professionals) who mediate them work through institutions designed to serve in part the self-interest of the practitioners, and . . . these institutions and practices must

respond to the power and needs of dominant groups in the society at large. (5)

Ultimately, to be sanctioned by the academic literary establishment, the canon must not offer a consistent and serious challenge to the ruling ideology.

In this chapter I will discuss the process by which a small number of novels are distilled from the vast body of contemporary fiction and granted pre-canonical status. And I will show how this process functions systematically to exclude or obfuscate counter-hegemonic discourse. In so doing, I am building upon a concern that has recently gained currency in literary and cultural theory. As Jane Tompkins argues,

The recognition that literary texts are man-made, historically produced objects . . . suggests a need to study the interests, institutional practices, and social arrangements that sustain the canon of classic works. (37)

While literary critics have examined the construction of the traditional canon, Tompkins for instance focusing on the development of Hawthorne's reputation, there has been little discussion of how contemporary literary reputations are developed and contemporary novels canonized. The most complete examinations of the process by which contemporary fiction is accorded cultural sanction are Richard Ohmann's

"The Shaping of a Canon, 1960-75" in Politics of Letters and Michael Berube's Marginal Forces/Cultural Centers.<sup>6</sup>

Ohmann lays out the process that determines the critical fate of contemporary novels. To reach pre-canonical status a novel must be selected by an agent and an editor, promoted by a publishing house's publicity department, chosen by a review editor (especially the one at the Sunday New York Times Book Review), read by New York metropolitan book buyers (whose patronage is necessary to commercial success), written about by critics at gatekeeper intellectual journals,<sup>7</sup> analyzed by academic critics and taught by college teachers. This model, of course, is neither a permanent nor an all encompassing description of how novels become pre-canonical. The vagaries of the market (the fate of the Times Book Review, the increasing marginalization of literature, the development of new technologies, etc.) can change the specifics of Ohmann's model; likewise, literary reputations can develop outside of this scheme.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, Ohmann's outline remains an accurate model of how in general contemporary novels are granted cultural sanction.

In Marginal Forces/Cultural Centers Berube examines the critical neglect of Melvin Tolson and the critical fascination with Thomas Pynchon and in so doing discusses the process by which contemporary literary reputations are developed. Like Ohmann, Berube suggests this process be-

gins when texts are printed and thus are "'given' an author who remains current (and who remains an item of currency, in the temporal and economic senses)" (59). This process continues with a small number of books that are assigned an aesthetic function--i.e., are authorized to be read as literature. These works are further reduced to those few granted pre-canonical status. And it is from this latter that the literary canon is culled. Although he draws extensively upon Ohmann's work, Berube differs from Ohmann in stressing the increasing importance of academics in the development of literary reputation and canon-building. For Berube "the academic activities of the past fifteen years positively require modification of Ohmann's thesis" (31) because of the creation of newly pre-canonical works that were not discussed in influential journals and because of a "newly formed competition between academic and non-academic critics for the right to represent contemporary and noncanonical authors." Berube also suggests that this competition "is perhaps one reason for the vehemence of recent journalistic attacks on the profession of literature" (32). I agree with Berube that the importance of academic critics has increased within the admittedly marginal realm of literary culture. In this dissertation I will examine the role critics have played in the development of a canon of Vietnam War fiction. In the remainder of this chapter, however, I will



look more closely at how the process identified by Ohmann and Berube encourages a literature that coheres with the dominant ideology.

### The Propaganda Model

Although they present convincing accounts of how contemporary novels are culturally sanctioned and although they suggest the biases and sympathies inherent in this sanctioning process, neither Ohmann nor Berube explains how this fragmented and unstable process promotes a literature that is broadly sympathetic to the interests of capital. They do not identify the specific mechanisms that constrain and marginalize oppositional discourse within contemporary literature. Analysis of how the dominant ideology is systematically reproduced in a society that seemingly encourages open debate is explained most cogently in Manufacturing Consent, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky's examination of the mass media. To Herman and Chomsky the media function as a propaganda system that "inculcate[s] individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society" (1). Information conveyed by the media is effectively censored because it must pass through a set of news filters: (A) the size, concentrated ownership, and profit orientation of mass media firms; (B) advertising as primary income source;

(C) reliance upon information provided and "experts" funded by government and business; (D) "flak" used to discipline the media; and (E) anticommunism. Since the academic literary establishment functions within the same social strata as the mainstream media and since much of the process that shapes literary reputation--especially contemporary fiction--occurs within the mass media and is thus subject to similar institutional beliefs and structures, Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model can help explain how the contemporary literary canon is constructed.

(A) Size, ownership, and profitability. This model does not precisely describe the process by which literary reputation develops. For one thing, unlike the mass media, whose success is determined by audience size and profit margin, an author's critical reputation does not rest on immediate or large-scale commercial prosperity. In fact, broad popularity may hinder as much as promote an author's scholarly acclaim.<sup>9</sup> The elite nature of literary studies and its privileging of refined categories of aesthetic judgment and esoteric theories of critical evaluation have often precluded from serious consideration works of mass appeal. For example, in attempting to achieve a critical distance from the crassness and ugliness they found in the burgeoning consumer culture of the early 20th century, literary modernists, who themselves were, according to Marcus Klein, a "dispossessed social aristocracy"

[qtd. in Berube, Marginal Forces 311]), endorsed a defamiliarizing aesthetic that often made their literature accessible only to an intellectual elite. For the educated middle class who felt similarly alienated from the commercial vulgarity of contemporary culture, it was this very marginality--its ironic distance and its sensitive evocations of alienation--that made literature vital. "In its ability to redescribe displacement from centrality as a revolutionary form of freedom and potency," writes Gerald Graff, "advanced culture furnishe[d] a model by which social powerlessness [could] be experienced as gratification" (92).

Marginalization, then, can be an effective strategy for canonization within literary culture. By marginalizing themselves, the modernists appeared free of commercial taint, free therefore to explore their independent visions, free as well to offer unsparing critiques of mass culture. Although the literature now championed by multiculturalists was not self-marginalized, scholarly rhetoric often focuses on the insights this literature gains from its outsider status. As Berube asserts, "to claim to speak from the margin is paradoxically to claim to speak from the position of authority, and to describe a margin is to describe an authoritative challenge to hegemony" (16-17).

Yet for all of the anti-elitist rhetoric of multiculturalism, the examination of marginalized literature

requires that texts be published, distributed, and evaluated. The manner in which contemporary novels are deemed worthy of serious attention, then, systematically reinforces the underlying and often unacknowledged presuppositions of liberal pluralism. This systematic reinforcement is accomplished because contemporary novels almost without exception must pass through a process that involves being published and achieving some prominence--usually through being published by a major firm (thus being reviewed in mainstream journals and newspapers) and through achieving sales consistent enough to remain in print. The strictures inherent in the size, ownership, and profitability of publishing firms, therefore, affect the construction of a literary canon. "It is painfully apparent today," writes Michael Norman, "that technology, demographics and particularly the interest in increasing dividends and profits seen in the last two decades have had a profound impact on American literature" (22).

Like so much else in American commerce, the publishing industry has been increasingly corporatized and has seen a greater concentration of ownership.<sup>10</sup> A 1981 report in Forbes declared, "it's hard to find an industry that has been picked cleaner by the conglomerates than book publishing" (qtd. in Coser 372-73). Although defenders of the current state of publishing claim 25,000 publishers in the U.S., a more realistic figure, according to

Ben Bagdikian, "is closer to 2,500 if one counts only American firms that regularly issue one book or more in any one year" (19). Bagdikian goes on to explain that more than half of the book business is held by six firms<sup>11</sup> and that if these six were equal in strength they would each have revenues of more than \$500 million while the remaining 2,494 firms, if equal in strength, would have less than \$3.5 million apiece. This discrepancy in wealth leads to numerous advantages for the larger firms, including, according to Bagdikian,

credit from big banks for expansion and acquisitions, bidding for manuscripts, negotiating and paying for shelf space and window displays in bookstores which increasingly are owned by national chains, mounting national sales staffs, buying advertising, and arranging for author interviews in the broadcast media.  
(19)

This concentrated ownership and market dominance and this decrease in independent publishing houses (by 1981, according to Thomas Whiteside, of the major independent hardcover book publishers, only W. W. Norton; Farrar, Strauss & Giroux; Houghton Mifflin; and Crown were not corporate-owned) make the marginalization of dissenting views in general, not to mention anti-capitalist and anti-nationalist views, more likely.

Such marginalization occurs not through overt censorship but through the inevitable institutional sympathy be-

tween publishing houses and their corporate owners. As Bagdikian argues,

In any field, whether the media or detergents, when most of the business is dominated by a few firms and the remainder of the field is left to a scattering of dozens or hundreds of smaller firms, it is the few dominant ones who control that market. With detergents it means higher prices and lowered choice. With the media it means the same thing for public news, information, ideas and popular culture.  
(19-20)

Said an anonymous publishing company employee in 1994, "all the jobs seem to be residing in three companies, and even that is so uncertain now." This source was unnamed, according to the New York Times, because employees "were forbidden to speak disparagingly of the company in public, or they would forfeit their severance packages" (Lyall). In such a climate editors will be even more circumspect about what they publish and will be more aware of the risks they run when publishing books critical of the liberal pluralist consensus.

For-profit publishing firms do not seek books that critique the dominant culture; rather, they seek to make profits and so attempt to anticipate and reflect public sentiment. Commercialism itself, then, is a significant filter, marginalizing and excluding books that are thought not sufficiently reflective of popular interests. For instance, Carole Gallagher speaks of the difficulty she had

in finding a publisher for American Ground Zero: The Secret Nuclear War, an examination of the effects of nuclear testing upon soldiers, test site workers, and the population living downwind from nuclear tests in six western states. Gallagher says, with only slight hyperbole, "I went to every publisher in the Western world and they turned my book down because, until MIT Press [a non-commercial publisher], they said it was a bummer, too expensive, or just too depressing" (qtd. in Hennelly 60). We can only speculate about the many books that meet with such resistance and that are either not published at all or published by obscure presses--and thus effectively silenced. As Jason Epstein, former Random House vice-president and founder of the New York Review of Books, asserts, "there is finally a point beyond which a publisher cannot go against the tide. Eventually he risks drowning" (qtd. in Kostelanetz 68). Due to their devotion to the bottom-line, corporate-owned publishing houses are even more likely to respond to mainstream opinion. Such opinion is not static; at times, particularly in the early 1930s and late 1960s, the public zeitgeist shifted leftward, and the publishing industry reflected this shift. As Chris Faatz notes,

During the sixties and seventies, corporate publishing was rife with books on the New Left, the civil rights struggles of African-Americans and other peoples of color and the rise of the women's movement. (915)

These historical moments were short-lived, however, and were followed by long periods of attack, revision, and re-crimination. Because the publishing industry is dominated by media conglomerates, and because there exists an inevitable sympathy between a publishing firm and its products, we are unlikely to see a renewed interest in leftist discourse on any significant scale within the publishing industry. Additionally, if in their attempts to reap profits publishers strive to reflect popular sentiment, books that question popular sentiment, books that make unfamiliar and challenging critiques of the status quo (as leftist books do almost by definition), will be judged unprofitable, will have difficulty getting published, and if published will be unlikely to receive widespread distribution.

I am not suggesting large firms will not publish leftist books, merely that such books will be published infrequently. Nor am I suggesting a conspiracy to shape public discourse. I am sure that most book editors would assert they had never been told what they could or could not publish. Thus Richard Snyder, president of Simon & Schuster declared,

I know what the truth is, whether I'm owned by Gulf & Western or not. I know that not one book we've put out has been tampered with as far as the content of the book is concerned. I know that we are totally independent. (qtd. in Whiteside 121)



Snyder's assertion of total independence would seem to be questioned, however, by Simon & Schuster's cancellation of Corporate Murder, in which author Mark Dowie examined corporate decision-making generally, notably Ford's design of the Pinto, with its notoriously dangerous gas tank. According to Bagdikian, although senior editor Nan Talese and her staff supported the book,

neither the title nor the book was acceptable. Talese reported . . . that the president of Simon & Schuster, Richard Snyder, was vehemently opposed to the manuscript because, among other reasons, he felt it made all corporations look bad. (30)

Bagdikian does not suggest that direct pressure was applied by Gulf & Western; instead, he argues that corporate influence occurs "without any pressure, it is natural and inevitable that important people in a media subsidiary will be conscious of who their owners are" (qtd. in Wiener 750).<sup>12</sup>

This understanding of the ideological limits of mainstream publishing firms is not speculation. There have been instances in which books were refused publication for strictly ideological reasons. Such was the case with Counter-Revolutionary Violence, a critique of U.S. foreign policy by Herman and Chomsky that was to be published in 1973 by Warner Modular, Inc., a subsidiary of Warner Communications. According to Warner Modular publisher Claude

McCaleb, after William Sarnoff, president of Warner Publishing, read an advance copy, he

immediately launched into a violent verbal attack . . . saying, among other things, that [Counter-Revolutionary Violence] was a pack of lies, a scurrilous attack on respected Americans, undocumented, a publication unworthy of a serious publisher. . . . He then announced that he had ordered the printer not to release a single copy . . . and that the . . . [book] would not be published. (qtd. in Bagdikian 33-34)

Sarnoff had the ads for this book cancelled and the Warner catalog listing the Herman/Chomsky book and the entire 10,000 copy press run destroyed. Similarly, in 1979 McGraw-Hill published Countercoup: The Struggle for the Control of Iran, an account of the overthrow of Iranian premier Mohammed Mossadegh written by former CIA officer Kermit Roosevelt. Roosevelt asserted that the coup had been undertaken at the behest of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. Upon complaints from British Petroleum, successor to AIOC, McGraw-Hill recalled the book from all stores and reviewers (Bagdikian 39). Another example of corporate pressure affecting a book's publication is Marc Eliot's Walt Disney: Hollywood's Dark Prince, signed by Bantam in 1989 and dropped in 1991. (It was eventually published by Birch Lane Press/Carol Publishing.) Jon Wiener speculates that Eliot's book was killed because Bantam had contracted with Disney to publish children's book versions of Disney movies (744).<sup>13</sup>

One should not be surprised by the rarity of such instances of overt censorship. There are many steps a manuscript must follow, each one of which may prevent its eventual publication. Many if not most radical books will have been eliminated from consideration by a major publishing house long before contracts are agreed to or manuscripts edited. Also, it takes only a few such prominent incidents to reveal the bounds of acceptable public discourse. The persistent affirmation of the dominant ideology by the mainstream publishing industry is due not to commands issued by media moguls or cultural commissars but to the editors and officers of publishing houses having internalized the values of the corporations for which they work. As for the absence of works of fiction from the above discussion, I suspect fiction is thought less serious and therefore less in need of such drastic intervention. Part of the reason fiction may be perceived as less serious is that literary tradition and prevailing critical orthodoxies have promoted a model of fiction that privileges the individual imagination and denigrates as polemical fiction that identifies specific social ills and that encourages social activism. This model has engendered a form of self-censorship--authors shaping their writings, consciously or unconsciously, to fit what they perceive are the ideological parameters of mainstream publishing. As Russell A. Berman writes,

no matter how literary production and consumption may be reciprocally determined, the nature of production has its own definite consequences: authors who understand themselves as employees dependent on publishing houses with precise marketing strategies will choose to write in certain ways. (56)

And these certain ways will not seriously challenge the liberal pluralist ideology endorsed by the publishing industry.

Another way that the concentrated ownership and narrow ideology of large publishing firms influence the critical reception of contemporary novels is through the New York Times Book Review, which remains the most important determinant of a book's commercial fate--especially the fate of books with serious literary pretensions. Its influence is clearly recognized by the publishing industry: more than half the advertising budgets of the main publishing houses are spent for space in the NYTBR. According to Ohmann,

The New York Times Book Review had about a million and a half readers, several times the audience of any other literary periodical. Among them were most bookstore managers, deciding what to stock, and librarians, deciding what to buy, not to mention the well-to-do, well-educated east-coasters who led in establishing hardback best-sellers. The single most important boost a novel could get was a prominent review in the Sunday New York Times. (Politics 71-72)

Although there is not a direct connection between favorable reception in the NYTBR and a book's lasting critical

reputation, the public and critical prominence that is gained from such reception is an important initial step in defining what in contemporary literature is worth serious scholarly attention--according to Julie Hoover and Charles Kadushin, 75% of elite intellectuals read the NYTBR (Ohmann, Politics 74). If agents, editors, and publishers are the obstacles a book must negotiate in order to be published, the NYTBR is the most significant early test of a book's critical worth, of its potential to reach pre-canonical status. Praise from the NYTBR is not a prerequisite for critical respect, considering other newspapers and journals and academic critics help determine a book's reputation. It is not praise so much as it is recognition by the NYTBR that contributes both to a book's sales and to its being considered worthy of review by others. The recognition a book gains from a review in the NYTBR also helps its subsequent publication as a paperback. Since hardcover fiction quickly goes out of print, a work must be printed in paperback in order to be available for critical evaluation and possible canonization. According to Ohmann, "the single most important boost a novel could get was a prominent review in the Sunday New York Times--better a favorable one than an unfavorable one, but better an unfavorable one than none at all" (Politics 72).

As a kind of cultural clearing house, then, the NYTBR serves an important function. Its role is to sort through

the approximately 45,000 books published yearly in the U.S., 4,000 of which are works of fiction (Norman 22), and to identify those worthy of serious attention. Such a comprehensive evaluation, though, is impossible. What the NYTBR actually does, therefore, is concentrate on books from major publishing houses. In so doing, the NYTBR naturalizes the values of the mainstream publishing culture; in other words, the NYTBR reaffirms and gives cultural sanction to the world-view of the professional-managerial class that dominates American book-publishing. Because books published by the larger houses are more likely to fall within the dominant ideological frame and because the NYTBR concentrates on books from these larger firms, the process by which contemporary novels are granted cultural sanction is ideologically constrained and reproduces a broadly consensual politics that does not seriously or consistently question capitalism and U.S. nationalism.

(B) Advertising. Unlike the news media, book publishers do not depend upon advertising revenue. Nonetheless, advertising can directly affect the kinds of books that are published and the manner in which they are received. For although book publishers may not depend upon advertising revenue, related companies within media conglomerates do. Thus when Prentice-Hall arranged to have Gerard Colby Zelig's Du Pont: Behind the Nylon Curtain made a selection of the Fortune Book Club (which belonged

to Time, Inc. and which was administered by the Book-of-the-Month-Club), Du Pont complained to Time, the Fortune Book Club cancelled its contract, and Prentice-Hall stopped promoting Zelig's book. According to Richard H. Rea, a representative of DuPont, Prentice-Hall general counsel William Daly revealed that the Book-of-the-Month Club

had notified Prentice-Hall that, after further pressure from Du Pont, they were cancelling their agreement. Daly said the pressure consisted of threats of litigation and cancellation of all of Du Pont advertising in Time, Life and Fortune. (qtd. in Bagdikian 38)

Similarly, in 1968 Reader's Digest Association was prepared to publish a book critical of the advertising industry--The Permissible Lie--through its subsidiary Funk & Wagnalls. Reader's Digest Association cancelled this book, according to Bagdikian, because "the association presumably felt threatened by loss of advertising from its magazine if its book subsidiary offended the advertising industry" (163).

But incidents such as these are infrequent. For a more telling instance of advertising's effect upon publishing, we need again to examine the New York Times Book Review. The sympathy between reviewers and editors at the NYTBR and the mainstream publishing industry, as I have already suggested, is due to their shared class and cul-

tural backgrounds, but it is due as well to the Book Review's dependence on advertising revenue. A 1968 study concluded that there was almost a direct correlation between the amount a publisher advertised and the review space accorded its books by the NYTBR.<sup>14</sup> Advertising, then, affects what will and will not be reviewed in the New York Times (and most likely in other newspapers as well). Newspaper reviews, especially the NYTBR, establish a book's initial reception and thereby help determine its sales (thus keeping it in print) and help develop its critical reputation. That a book's being reviewed depends in part on advertising, therefore, is one more instance in which the size and wealth of publishing firms and the dominance of a market economy influence the shaping of the literary canon.

(C) Experts. The creation of a canon and the development of literary reputations depend upon two sets of experts: those who construct and market books (agents,<sup>15</sup> editors, and marketing staff) and those who evaluate books (reviewers, critics, and academics.) I have already discussed many of the ideological constraints imposed upon and by this first group. Reviewers, critics, and academics--who define the formal characteristics that determine literary merit, explicate such features, and place literary works within various genres, conventions, and traditions--likewise may function as an ideological barrier.



By privileging image patterns and repetition, experts can downplay a text's social dynamics; by showing how these formal devices encourage multiple and often contradictory meanings, experts can suggest the naivete of political formulas and the richness and complexity of the individual imagination; and by focusing on a few, exclusive traditions, experts can marginalize counter-traditions and their potentially alternative ideologies. Reviewers and critics, then, can hinder a book's political import by downplaying its social commentary and praising its formal qualities or by forthrightly criticizing its ideology. To demonstrate how reviewers function as an ideological filter, I will discuss the critical reception of two recent novels: Richard Powers's The Gold Bug Variations and Operation Wandering Soul.

The Gold Bug Variations was accorded ample praise by the literary-critical establishment; it was a finalist for the National Book Critics' Circle Award and was chosen book-of-the-year by Time. The praise given GBV was directed almost exclusively at its intellectual breadth and linguistic and structural inventiveness, with virtually no discussion of the book's social critique. USA Today declared GBV "both a homage to high art and an intricate mystery," Kirkus Reviews spoke of "the mysteries of love and the passionate pursuit of knowledge," while for the New York Times it "carries us on a cerebral quest for a

philosophical heffalump" (Jones 9). Yet in GBV Powers forthrightly demonstrates how market-determined social relations thwart community. The novel's central characters are alienated from the culture at large, their social contact consisting of little more than "checkout clerks, the muffled sadism from upstairs and a host of cheerful, limited-time phone offers" (228). They must ignore the "fifteen million adjacent catastrophes," must "consign entire boroughs to misery beyond addressing," and must step "gingerly over a baseball-batted body at the top of the subway stairs" (291). The novel's central metaphor, which revolves around the similarities between Bach's Goldberg Variations and the genetic code, is meant to make us aware of the interdependence of life--a vital concern at a time when "the whole community is about to go under, pulled in by our error. Why," Powers asks, "do we want to revoke the contract, scatter it like a nuisance cobweb, simplify it with asphalt?" (325). In GBV Powers attempts to provide us with a vision of the world that is grounded in biology and genetics, one that may help us overcome apathy and ignorance and lead us to revere natural creation. It is his hope that "anyone who once adds up the living number must act ecologically, commensually forever" (326). While its politics can be criticized for being oblique and too focused on individual action, GBV does make a sustained argument for social change. Critical praise for

GBV, however, has focused on its structural and linguistic inventiveness and has paid scant attention to its political urgency. Such formalist priorities are commonplace in the assessing of literary merit, particularly within the culture of book-reviewing. By endorsing a formalist method of literary evaluation and by downplaying the political merit of literary texts, reviewers and critics promote fiction that emphasizes the figurative over the social and thus further diminish whatever small potential literature may have to effect social change.

Operation Wandering Soul, although a finalist for the National Book Award, received far more mixed reviews than did The Gold Bug Variations. While some of this criticism stemmed from this book's failings, as well as its daunting complexity, some also stemmed from Powers's more overt social critique. For OWS is an indictment of the harmful effects of consumer culture, particularly upon a group of children at a charity hospital in contemporary Los Angeles, of the lethal consequences of U.S. imperialism in southeast Asia, and of the brutal treatment of children throughout history. As an example of Powers's often frank social critique, here is his description of Bangkok:

a skylined, sprawling, runaway, AIDS-infested needle nest. It had become a child-peddling shambles. Some hundred thousand juvenile whores of both sexes made a living in the place, the murder capital of the exotic East, the Golden Triangle's peddler, catamite to the slickest of tourist classes, gutted by CarniCruze

junkets and semiconductor sweat shops, glistening in fat postcolonialism, clear-cutting its irreplaceable upcountry forest to support its habit. (309)

OWS has many similar passages that brutally and specifically critique the suffering wrought by capitalism. To repudiate this critique, Bruce Bawer in the Washington Post asserts that

Powers divides people too neatly into good and bad, and does so along crude, politically correct lines, aligning himself throughout with . . . the received ideas of today's academic establishment.

For Lee Lescaze in the Wall Street Journal,

Mr. Powers decries the brutalization of children by man and disease. That is not a case that needs much arguing. It is hard to think of another novel in which such a sophisticated presentation wraps such a simple core.

Lescaze also declares an "added--and cliched--burden" the notion that the central character's father "was a government agent who wrought evil in Indochina and elsewhere on behalf of the U.S."

According to these critics, then, to demonstrate the effects of social injustice in contemporary America is crude, to decry the brutalization of children is simplistic, and to reveal the global terror brought about by U.S. foreign policy is cliched. Note that the ideological ob-

jections raised by Bawer and Lescaze are presented in the guise of aesthetic judgment. Thus it is not Powers's critique of capitalism that Bawers objects to but the fact that this critique is too simplistic; it is not rich and complex and ambiguous as is, say, New Criticism or liberal pluralism. For Lescaze the brutalization of children is hardly worth discussing because it too is simple and unsophisticated. Likewise, Lescaze objects to Powers's criticism of U.S. militarism not because of ideological differences but because this criticism is cliched. In the guise of aesthetic evaluation, Bawer and Lescaze make what are essentially political arguments that mean to discredit OWS and to discourage further production of such social criticism.

An emphasis on figuration by literary "experts" can also cause the texts of writers outside the dominant literary tradition to be further marginalized. Texts with an unfamiliar aesthetic may easily go unappreciated. Similarly, whereas canonical literature is valued for its allusive and intertextual richness, a text from outside the white, male tradition--whose author may consciously wish not to associate him/herself with a literary tradition linked to social oppression and injustice--may be read as simple and transparent, its figurations remaining unrecognized because untraditional. Much recent criticism, therefore, has been devoted to identifying alterna-

tive literary aesthetics and traditions.<sup>16</sup> These revisionist critics share Rabinowitz's sentiment that we need

to teach ourselves to read in new ways (not simply in a new way), ways that are self-conscious about how interpretation itself can be ideological, and ways that can thus help us to make the most of the rich literary heritage that has been passed down to us.  
(230)

Dominated by a politics of identity, however, this revisionism frequently recapitulates many of the problems of liberal pluralism. It diminishes the significance of class, since, as John Guillory writes, "class cannot be constructed as a social identity in the same way as race or gender because it is not, in the current affirmative sense, a 'social identity' at all" (13). It accepts the notion that group demands can be resolved by the interest-group politics of liberal pluralism. And it alleges as primary and efficacious the politics of representation. Thus when evaluating literary texts, these experts, be they traditional or revisionary, often help sanction the view that although there may be a gap between democratic rhetoric and reality, this gap can be closed and the current political structure revised to approximate America's egalitarian ideals.

(D) Flak. Even the modest revisions that have been made within literary studies have generated flak from politicians, pundits, and journalists. A concern as trivial

as the make-up of the literary canon has in fact received considerable media attention, spurred on by conservatives like Alan Bloom and Dinesh D'Souza. Following their lead, William A. Henry, III in Time described universities as an upside-down world and asked us to "imagine a literature class that equates Shakespeare and the novelist Alice Walker" (66); Henry bemoaned the fact that "Western cultural and social values [are] so out of favor in the classroom when so much of the rest of the world has moved . . . to embrace them" (68). Newsweek ridiculed the notion that the literary "canon perpetuates the power of 'dead white males' over women and blacks from beyond the grave" (54). For the New Republic,

the "multiculturalist" criticism of the canon fails to grasp . . . that the canon is itself a cacophony, that it teaches not certainty but doubt, that it presents not a single Western doctrine about the true or the good or the beautiful, but an internecine Western war between different accounts of those values, which will rattle the student more than it will reassure her. (6)

To Fred Siegel, also in the New Republic,

perhaps the most enabling fiction of multiculturalism is that there has been a single core curriculum composed of the canonical texts of Western civilization that is widely forced, with great harm to minorities, upon students across the country. (36)

And Robert Hughes in Time derided multiculturalists' perception of the canon as "that oppressive Big Bertha whose muzzle is trained over the battlements of Western Civ at the black, the gay and the female" (47).

In a culture with increasing illiteracy, with little concern for literature and literary studies, with a persistent under-funding of education, and with a widening gap between rich and poor, such media concern for the traditional literary canon is best understood as part of the broader public debate over "political correctness." The P.C. scare of 1991-92--with cover stories in Time, Newsweek, the New Republic, New York, and the Atlantic; with stories on the nightly news and five consecutive nights of discussion on the "MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour"; with criticism from N.E.H. chair Lynne Cheney, Secretary of Education William Bennet, and President George Bush--functioned as flak, negative commentary encouraged and promoted by powerful individuals and institutions. The great P.C. scare, as conveyed by the media, served (and continues to serve) as a means of disciplining universities--and the humanities specifically--for making too public, too consistent, and too radical a critique of status quo liberal capitalism, and for potentially hindering the educated (i.e., professional-managerial) class's internalization of the dominant ideology.<sup>17</sup>

(E) Anticommunism. Since anticommunism has been a consistent feature of American political rhetoric and a



means of disabling even vaguely leftist discourse, its use in the shaping of the literary culture should be no surprise. Anticommunism has been used (1) to discipline the academy generally, (2) to critique individual texts, and (3) to shape and promote dominant critical methodologies.

1. The academy has been a particular target of anti-communism.<sup>18</sup> In recent years this attack, although portrayed as a defense against the threat of "political correctness," has appropriated the totalitarianism-invoking rhetoric of anticommunism. Newsweek identified P.C. as "a totalitarian philosophy" that "one defie[d] . . . at one's peril" (Adler 51, 50); John Taylor in a notorious anti-P.C. article in New York cited Hannah Arendt's The Origins of Totalitarianism and approvingly quoted Camille Paglia: "'It's fascism of the left. . . . These people behave like the Hitler Youth'" (35); George Will fantasized about an "academic constabulary" patrolling "campuses, pouncing on speech, films, teaching material, even parties that deviate from approved ideology"; and an editorial in the Chicago Tribune accused the professoriate of "crime against humanity" (qtd. in Berube, "Public Image" 31). Taylor's article in New York featured a photograph of Red Guards parading their dunces and Hitler Youth burning books (33). And Taylor quoted history professor Alan Kors: "In certain respects, the University of Pennsylvania has become like the University of Peking" (35). Similarly, Charles

Krauthammer saw university-sponsored sessions in racial sensitivity as a "middle-class take on Chinese reeducation camp[s]." Attacks such as these were designed to make left academics more circumspect about the content and methods of their instruction. Because the academy plays an important role in determining literary reputation, these attacks have the potential to limit examinations of leftist literature, as well as the implementation of leftist literary and social analysis.

2. Since books that espouse a radical politics are not frequently reviewed by mainstream reviewers, and since there are more subtle ways to attack a book's leftist politics, anticommunism is not often employed by mainstream book reviewers. Still, book reviewers in large circulation magazines and newspapers are likely to share, in broad outline, the ideology of the periodicals for which they write, and these periodicals are likely to fit within the spectrum of acceptable public discourse (a spectrum that excludes practical consideration of communism). For an example of how public scholarship reflects the prevailing ideology, consider the case of China scholarship in the 1950s. In response to the fall of China and the subsequent McCarthy backlash, there was, according to Peter Steinfels,

a nearly complete change in the scholars reviewing China studies for the New York Times and the New York

Herald Tribune. At these two papers, the group who had done over 80 percent of the reviewing in this field between 1945 and 1950 reviewed not a single book after 1952. (6-7)

A similar change occurred in the New York Review of Books. After a flirtation with left radicalism during the 60s, publishing essays by the likes of Noam Chomsky and Stokely Carmichael (and being red-baited for doing so),<sup>19</sup> the Review moved steadily to the right, until by the 1990s it could take a lead role in proclaiming the onslaught of P.C.

Although anticommunism is not often used by book reviewers, it does sometimes still show its cold war face, particularly when a work threatens to expose in convincing fashion the falsity of some of the bedrock beliefs of liberal culture. For example, in his review of Manufacturing Consent in the New Republic, Nicholas Lemann, a liberal writing in an establishment journal, used the familiar tropes and conceits of anticommunism. According to Lemann, Herman and Chomsky argue that "the big-time press knowingly prints falsehoods and suppresses inconvenient truths, the better to maintain the party line." Lemman also suggests that for Herman and Chomsky, "there isn't much difference between the New York Times and Pravda." Their argument, he writes, "is delivered in the leaden prose of a sectarian tract. . . . Though they use the word

'Orwellian' a lot, they write in exactly the ideological style that Orwell so perfectly parodied."

Note that Lemann's ideological objections to Manufacturing Consent (like Bawer's and Lescaze's to Operation Wandering Soul) are dressed as aesthetic objections: it is not their politics, not their critique of the liberal media culture's systemic bias that Lemann objects to but their "leaden prose" and "ideological style." How, I wonder, could Herman and Chomsky write a book that is overtly ideological, one that attempts to identify the hidden ideology of the mass media, without employing an ideological style? In wishing for a less ideological style, Lemann actually wishes for less ideology. He wants the normative, ostensibly non-ideological "style" of liberal pluralist discourse that Herman and Chomsky are at pains to show is ideological. Ironically, in employing the rhetoric of anticommunism in his review, Lemann reaffirms Herman and Chomsky's assertion that anticommunism is an effective tool for attacking information that threatens the bipartisan consensual limits of American mass media.

3. Anticommunism has also been influential in promoting specific critical methodologies. Two of the central figures in the ascendancy of New Criticism, Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren, for instance, initially subtitled the Agrarian manifesto I'll Take My Stand, "A Tract against Communism." Tate, Warren, and others posited

their literary aesthetic as disinterested and objective, a method by which the timeless and universal features of great literature could be explicated. Tate identified the task of poetry as "the constant rediscovery of the permanent nature of man." On the other hand, "propagandist art," for Tate, demonstrated "that side of his nature in which he is interested in at the moment; it is a temporary oversimplification of the human predicament." Literature that sought to identify and correct contemporary social ills Tate viewed as "an escape from reality" (qtd. in Foley 4). Similarly, Malcolm Cowley derided literature with "social aims and political programs" because these were "likely to be accepted only on the top level of the mind" (87)--that part of the mind occupied with such ephemeral concerns as poverty and hunger, sexism and segregation. Likewise, for John Crowe Ransom, poetry was "always something magnificently chimerical" and would be "irresponsible if it would really commit us to an action" (qtd. in Reising 169-70). This New Critical worship of an apolitical literature, of form for form's sake, of course, is itself political. For in denigrating literature that sought political action and that offered a radical critique of the status quo, New Critics enshrined a literature that endorsed the prevailing ethos of liberal pluralism.

In Creating Faulkner's Reputation, Lawrence Schwartz showed that more than inherently political, New Criticism,

particularly its championing of Faulkner, was actively promoted and funded by the Rockefeller foundation as a means of furthering America's cultural reputation and encouraging its global influence. For Schwartz "the intelligentsia understood that the defense of culture was part of a larger economic and political struggle with the Soviet Union" (140); in this struggle,

the aesthetics of formalism and modernism not only reflected a political ideology but helped to legitimize it as well. Literary modernism, with "individualism" adopted as its symbol of artistic freedom, became an instrument of anti-communism and an ideological weapon with which to battle the "totalitarianism" of the Soviet Union. (Schwartz 201)20

New Criticism, then, with its repudiation of the vulgarly social and its praise for balance and ambiguity, was an implicit endorsement of liberal pluralism and an attack on fanaticisms generally and communism particularly. To John Crowe Ransom, a poem was "like a democratic state, so to speak, which realizes the ends of a state without sacrificing the personal character of its citizens" (New Criticism 54). According to Ransom,

people who are engaged with their pet 'values' become habitual killers. . . . It is thus that we lose the power of imagination, or whatever faculty it is by which we are able to contemplate things as they are in their rich, contingent materiality. (World's Body 116)

In the same manner, when discussing Dreiser's literary flaws, Lionel Trilling spoke of that "dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet" (10). Once New Criticism was naturalized and became the essential method of literary evaluation, this anticommunism, this association of politicized criticism with "habitual killers" who meet at a "dark and bloody crossroads" was no longer necessary. To the extent that New Critical principles persist (particularly within gatekeeper intellectual journals and mainstream book reviewers), however, the principles of liberal pluralism continue to be reinforced and radical social critique to be minimized.

An essential element of New Criticism, anticommunism has also shaped contemporary literary and cultural theory. For many contemporary theorists, Marxism is a totalizing discourse based upon an almost metaphysical belief in economic determinism. As such, Marxism is viewed as a continuation of the Enlightenment paradigm, is thought to rely upon claims to universal reason and knowable truth, and thus is seen to thwart rather than encourage liberation. Ranier Nagele identifies three main components of this totalizing discourse that contemporary theorists seek to overturn (or at least to problematize): "teleology of a universal history, teleology of the autonomous subject, and teleology of a universal discourse as the language of a universal spirit," involving such procedures as "cen-

tralization (clear hierarchies of center and margin, of inclusion and exclusion, definite boundaries); spiritualization and sublimation; unification of language games." For Nagele, "unification out of a need for universal control and domination is the underlying principle" (94-95). Likewise, Dick Hebdige rejects master narratives "which set out to address a transcendental Subject, to define an essential human nature, to prescribe a global human destiny or to proscribe collective human goals" (qtd. in Arnowitz 68). And Jean-Francois Lyotard calls for a "severe reexamination . . . on the thought of the Enlightenment, on the idea of a unitary end of history and of a subject" (73). For Michel Foucault, the Marxist concept of ideology is troubling because "it always stands in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count as truth" and because it refers necessarily "to something of the order of a subject" (P/K 118). Foucault concludes, therefore, that

one should not assume a massive and primal condition of domination, a binary structure with 'dominators' on one side and 'dominated' on the other, but rather a multiform production of relations of domination (P/K 142).

Writers such as Foucault, Lyotard, and Hebdige do not resort to red-baiting and in fact incorporate many insights from Marxism. But even without overt anticommu-



nism, contemporary theorists view class, false consciousness, and historical materialism as oppressive conceits; instead, they find resistance and liberation within existing social structures. Hence Foucault suggests we "approach politics from behind and cut across societies on the diagonal" (FR 376). In their celebrations of indeterminacy, their minimizing of class analysis, and their wish for heterogeneity, these critics endorse a position that resembles liberal pluralism. Change the key slightly and Foucault's "multiform production of the relations of domination" becomes Ransom's "things . . . in their rich, contingent materiality."

#### The Vietnam War Canon

Having passed through these filters, there now exists a canon of critically acclaimed novels and memoirs about the Vietnam War. These works were composed, published, and received during a time of ascendent conservatism, a time when, writes Andrew Martin, "neoconservative interpretations of Vietnam worked to transfer responsibility for the lost war from those who had planned and executed it to those who had opposed it" (xxi). The critically praised war literature of this period does not generally blame the opponents of the war, and the ideologies conveyed in these texts are various, contradictory, and often critical of American policy. But the Vietnam War canon

does not explode prevailing notions about the fundamental morality of U.S. actions, nor does it document the widescale killing of Vietnamese. In fact, within these texts the Vietnamese are practically invisible. From this literature one does not see what Robert McNamara described in a memorandum to Lyndon Johnson as a "picture of the world's greatest superpower killing or seriously injuring 1,000 noncombatants a week, while trying to pound a tiny backward nation into submission" (qtd. in Martin 20). With its focus on the suffering of individual American soldiers and its refusal to consider the war as an extension of U.S. global interests, this literature does not challenge and in many ways supports the right's ongoing historical reconstruction. This support is encouraged (and radical critique hindered) by a sanctioning process involving literary agents, editors, and marketers; review editors and book-reviewers; critics at gate-keeper intellectual journals; academic critics and college teachers. Each of these cultural guardians in turn is constrained by the biases, filters, and sympathies inherent in mainstream corporate, media, and educational institutions. These factors combine to promote a literature that does not seriously question elite interests and beliefs. Thus, although the Vietnam War produced widespread public dissension, as well as a critique of corporate capitalism and U.S. imperialism, the literature of the Vietnam War that

has received consistent cultural sanction makes only a limited and modest critique of U.S. militarism in Indochina, one consistent with the liberal pluralist values of American literary culture.

## Notes

1. Tate qtd. in Schwartz 76; Ohmann, English in America 303.

2. As Russell Reising makes clear, there has been a long-standing alternative social tradition within American literature consisting of

(1) writers, texts, and even genres that reflect a direct, often critical apprehension of the historical, social, economic, and political contexts of American culture; (2) the broader assumption that all literature mediates social reality; and (3) criticism that grants the importance, if not the centrality, of such social concerns, one that takes itself seriously as a form of social knowledge. (34)

Even with the broadening and decentering of the canon, though, this alternative tradition remains marginalized.

3. Gregor McLennan identifies the following as pluralist conventions:

(1) a sociology of competing interest groups; (2) a conception of the state as a political mechanism responsive to the balance of societal demands; (3) an account of the democratic civic culture which sets a realistic minimum measure for the values of political participation and trust; (4) an empiricist and multi-factorial methodology of social science. (qtd. in Guillory 4)

4. That the academic literary establishment does allow leftist critique--this dissertation, for instance--is due to this very insignificance. If English departments

had access to real power in this society, it is unlikely that radical discourse would have even the limited acceptance it is now accorded.

5. As Chris Faatz notes (and as commercial publishing house's fiction lists reveal), "many large publishing houses have been casting an opportunistic eye on the profits made possible by the explosion of work by lesbian and gay, African-American and Latino/a authors" (915).

6. Although they do not concern themselves with contemporary literature and thus are not directly useful for developing a model of the contemporary literary/academic culture, Lawrence Schwartz in Creating Faulkner's Reputation and John Rodden in The Politics of Literary Reputation do offer specific case studies that inform my cultural model and reaffirm its general outlines.

7. For Ohmann, writing in 1978, these included the New York Review of Books, the New Republic, the New Yorker, Commentary, Saturday Review, Partisan Review, and Harpers.

8. John Rodden explains:

even this rudimentary characterization of cultural radiation--from author to critic to group to public--is . . . routinely contradicted. The radiation of reputation is not a simple 'trickle-down' process: there is constant back-and-forth movement and inter-level interaction among people and institutions. Nor is the 'average reader' a passive consumer of elite and mass media opinions. Sometimes critic-reviewers will be influenced as much or more by a group or by the public as the reverse in a particular case. Thus

the radiation of a reputation is not merely patterned in ever-widening circles. Images and opinions are exchanged from person to person and from small groups to large groups, each communication act modifying the image in different ways. (418n.)

9. This inverse relationship between literary reputation and commercial success, which is wrapped up in our notion of literature as the imaginative expression of individual genius, was shaped by the Romantics and their reaction to being marginalized by nascent industrialism and commercial book-publishing. Writes Terry Eagleton,

Deprived of any proper place within the social movements which might actually have transformed industrial capitalism into a just society, the writer was increasingly driven back into the solitariness of his own creative mind. . . . Art was extricated from the material practices, social relations and ideological meanings in which it is always caught up, and raised to the status of a solitary fetish. (Literary 20-21)

10. In 1981 Thomas Whiteside gave a brief history of the merging and corporatizing of the publishing industry, explaining that within the previous twenty years

the hardcover trade-book houses of Alfred A. Knopf and Pantheon Books were taken over by Random House and Random House was acquired by RCA. Random House then acquired the formerly independent paperback publishing company Ballantine Books. And then RCA sold Random House to Newhouse Publications, which owns the Newhouse newspaper chain. In the last four years, Dell Publishing, one of the principal mass-market-paperback houses, was acquired by Doubleday & Company, the largest trade-book publisher in the coun-

try, which had previously acquired, among other enterprises, the Literary Guild, the nation's second-largest book club. Another mass-market-paperback publisher, Fawcett Publications, was acquired by CBS, which had already acquired yet another mass-market-paperback house, Popular Library, and the hardcover house Holt, Rinehart & Winston. The hardcover house Bobbs-Merrill was acquired by the International Telephone & Telegraph Corporation. Pocket Books, a leading publisher, was acquired, as part of the hardcover house Simon & Schuster, by the conglomerate Gulf & Western, which also owned Paramount Pictures. G.P. Putnam's Sons, which had acquired the trade-book house of Coward, McCann & Geoghegan and the paperback publisher Berkeley Books, was acquired by MCA, which had earlier acquired Universal Pictures. The hardcover house Viking Press became a part of Penguin Books, which, in turn, was owned by a conglomerate known as the Pearson-Longman group. Bantam Books, another of the leading paperback publishers, wound up under the control of Bertelsman Verlag, of Germany, probably the largest publishing concern in the world. The hardcover house E. P. Dutton was acquired by the Dutch publishing complex Elsevier. Another hardcover house, Little, Brown & Company, was acquired by Time, Inc., which subsequently acquired the largest existing book club, the Book-of-the-Month Club. And this is only a partial listing of corporate mergers in the publishing list in the recent past. (2-3)

11. Paramount Communications (Simon & Schuster, Ginn & Company, and others); Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (Academic Press and others); Time Warner (Little, Brown; Scott, Foresman; Time-Life Books; Book-of-the-Month-Club); Bertelsmann, A.G. (Doubleday, Bantam Books, Dell, Literary Guild); Reader's Digest Association (Condensed Books and others); Newhouse (Random House and others).

12. Simon & Schuster also demanded to see a copy of Bagdikian's The Media Monopoly before publication and argued unsuccessfully for deletions.

13. In his essay Jon Wiener also discusses the troubled histories of Robert Sam Anson's The Rules of the Magic (on the Disney corporation); Christopher Byron's Skin Tight: The Bizarre Story of Guess vs. Jordache; Thomas Hauser's Missing (originally titled The Execution of Charles Horman); Peter Matthiessen's In the Spirit of Crazy Horse; and Roy Rowan and Sandy Smith's Connections: American Business and the Mob.

14. The following statistics, taken from Ohmann's "The Shaping of a Canon, 1960-1975" (72), originated in a study conducted by Harry Smith and printed in The Newsletter, 30 July 1969:

<u>Publishers</u>	<u>Pages of ads</u>	<u>Pages of reviews</u>
Random House	74	58
Harper	29	22
Little, Brown	29	21
Dutton	16	4
Lippincott	16	4
Harvard	9	negligible

15. In 27 years Viking allegedly has published one unsolicited manuscript out of 135,000 submissions, Random House one out of 60,000 (Rodden 58, 416n.). Even if, as I suspect, these figures are exaggerated, they nonetheless reveal the important gate-keeping role played by literary agents.

16. The following is meant merely to suggest some of the more prominent examples of this criticism. For Afri-



can-American literature, see Barbara Christian, Black Women Novelists, Henry Louis Gates (ed.), Black Literature and Literary Theory and The Signifying Monkey, Robert Stepto, From behind the Veil; for women's literature, Nina Baym, Women's Fiction, Judith Fetterly, The Resisting Reader, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic; for proletarian literature, Barbara Foley, Radical Representations; for gay literature, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Between Men, Thomas E. Yingling, Hart Crane and the Homosexual Text; and for non-Western literature, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, The Empire Writes Back, Wole Soyinka, Myth, Literature and the African World.

17. For a fuller demonstration of the ideological function of P.C. see Jim Neilson, "The Great PC Scare: Tyrannies of the Left, Rhetoric of the Right" in PC Wars: Politics and Theory in the Academy, ed. Jeffrey Williams.

18. See Ellen W. Schrecker, No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities and Robert Cohen, When the Old Left Was Young: Student Radicals and America's First Mass Student Movement, 1929-1941.

19. To Tom Wolfe the Review was "the chief theoretical organ of radical chic," and to Walter Goodman it was "cocktail party revolutionary"; Esquire asserted that "from among [its] authors the next Stalin and his speechwriters will emerge" (qtd. in Nobile 7, 5, 126).

20. Geraldine Murphy makes a similar point when she argues that

the cultural front of this apocalyptic struggle between East and West pitted a socialist realism controlled by the State for its own propagandistic purposes against a subjective symbolistic, abstract modernism--the kind of art that readily symbolized the independent critical role of the artist in a democratic society. (738)

## CHAPTER 2

## THE AMERICANIZING OF GREENE

The most glaring attack in the book . . . is not directed at American "interference" . . . in Vietnam; far from partisan theories on the role of particular nations, Greene's real assault is aimed at self-deception.

--Anne T. Salvatore

I would go to almost any length to put my feeble twig in the spokes of American foreign policy.

--Graham Greenel

## The Reviewers

When published in the United States in 1956, Graham Greene's The Quiet American created a minor sensation. Of particular concern to reviewers was Greene's depiction of the quiet American, Alden Pyle, a seemingly innocent and well-intentioned diplomat who, in an attempt to promote U.S. interests via a "Third Force" between colonialism and communism, was responsible for the deaths by explosion of fifty innocent people. Viewing Pyle as a representative American and his actions as characteristic of American foreign policy, many reviewers took Greene to task for his malign depiction of U.S. behavior in Indochina.

Greene's criticism of American policy could not be reconciled with a belief in U.S. support for democratic social movements. In reality--as demonstrated in the

early 1950s by the U.S.-sponsored overthrow of Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran and Jacobo Guzman Arbenz in Guatemala and by U.S. refusal to allow nationwide elections in Vietnam--democracy was never much more than a rhetorical ploy in America's war against communism. Ignorant of the extent of U.S. covert action and U.S.-sponsored terror, operating within an era of vigorous and often rabid anticommunism and having already recognized Greene as an important contemporary writer (The Power and the Glory especially having achieved nearly pre-canonical status), American literary culture faced a potentially awkward situation with the publication of The Quiet American. A respected and culturally sanctioned writer, Greene not only disagreed with the conventional understanding of U.S. global policy but found this policy murderous and even showed sympathy for the Viet Minh. Greene was too prominent a writer to ignore, his argument too radical to endorse. The result: American literary culture acknowledged his skill but repudiated the anti-Americanism and communist-sympathizing of The Quiet American.

Robert Gorham Davis's front page review in the New York Times Book Review makes clear how troubling The Quiet American was to status quo belief in the probity of U.S. foreign policy. Davis flatly declares The Quiet American

a political novel--or parable--about the war in Indochina, employing its characters less as individuals

than as representatives of their nations or political factions.

In The Quiet American, according to Davis, "the effect of circumstances is specifically ideological and political." Davis finds unfair the argument between Alden Pyle and the novel's narrator, middle-aged English newspaper correspondent Thomas Fowler, objecting to "the easy way Fowler is permitted to triumph in his debate with Americans" (1). And he argues that "there is no real debate in the book, because no experienced and intelligent anti-Communist is represented there" (32). It is difficult to imagine Davis or any other mainstream critic objecting to an anticommunist writer's failure to include the views of an experienced and intelligent communist. Davis's objection, then, is really more to the nature of Greene's argument than to its lack of fairness; it is not the easy way Fowler is permitted to triumph that Davis objects to but that Fowler is permitted to triumph at all. Besides, the novel's main argument rests not on the dialogue between these two characters but on the murderous actions Greene imputes to Pyle and thus to the U.S., actions Greene identifies in the novel's foreword as rooted in historical fact.

Davis also faults Greene for disregarding the lethal consequences of communist rule. He reminds us of "the thousands of individuals who make desperate escapes from Communist countries every week in order to live as humans"

(32); he suggests that "the elimination of liberals and social democrats always comes first . . . in the Communists' program for political seizure of power" (1); and he wonders whether in granting primary justice to the communist cause Greene has reconciled himself to the "terrible surrender" that "history or God now demands of the church and Western civilization" (32). It is difficult to see in Greene's modest criticism of U.S. foreign policy and occasional support for the Viet Minh the fall of the West. Davis's rhetoric here has little to do with Greene's text and everything to do with cold war anticommunism.

Besides suggesting Greene's ignorance of the terror of communist imperialism, Davis criticizes him for implying "that only the Communist respects or understands the peasant" (qtd. in Davis 1). In finding a sympathy between communists and Vietnamese peasants, Greene (or so Davis alleges) falls prey to a familiar romanticizing of communist-led anti-colonial struggles. What Davis does not recognize is that Greene through Fowler speaks of an indigenous Vietnamese communism that in the context of post-World War II Vietnam was the only large social force that respected and understood the peasantry and that offered the possibility of overturning the French colonial administration, of implementing a policy of genuine land reform, of addressing the country's persistent poverty. As Gabriel Kolko argues,

The basic pattern in modern Vietnamese history was the non-Communists' endemic inability to relate to the dynamics of their own times. Only the Communist Party could fill such a vacuum. Its triumph was due not simply to its own abilities but also to the virtual absence of other serious opposition to French colonialism. (13)

This widespread support for the communists was recognized by the CIA, who argued that "If the scheduled national elections are held in July 1956, and if the Viet Minh does not prejudice its political prospects, the Viet Minh will almost certainly win" (qtd. in Kolko 84).<sup>2</sup> In his inability to see Vietnamese anti-colonialism and communism as other than part of the global red menace, Davis echoes a belief common to U.S. policy elites, one that is stated forthrightly in a 1954 report by the Special Committee on the Threat of Communism and included within The Pentagon Papers: "Communist imperialism is a transcending threat to each of the Southeast Asian states" (Shehhan, et al. 37) and "defeat of the Viet Minh in Indo-China is essential if the spread of Communist influence in Southeast Asia is to be halted" (Sheehan, et al. 35).<sup>3</sup> Because it sought to hinder the spread of communism in Southeast Asia and to maintain French support against communism in Europe, the U.S., from the end of the Japanese occupation of Vietnam, supported the French in their attempt to reinstitute colonial rule. According to the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars,

though the French returned to Indochina first in a few symbolic French transports, these were followed by a long succession of American ships, flying the American flag, manned by American crews. The French army, disembarking from these ships in American-made uniforms, launched their assaults with American lend-lease weapons, tanks, trucks, and jeeps. (23)

Between 1950 and 1954 U.S. military aid to the French increased from \$150 million to \$1 billion, and by 1954 the U.S. was underwriting 80 percent of the cost of the war (Committee 23). American support for the French and opposition to Vietnamese anti-colonialism (and much of the subsequent history of American militarism in Southeast Asia) can be traced to its need to promote the interests of capital by stopping the spread of communism, as well as to an inability to recognize the local and specific nature of Vietnamese communism. It is this American insensitivity to Vietnamese culture and hostility toward communism that Green satirizes through Alden Pyle--and that Robert Gorham Davis demonstrates in his review of The Quiet American.

Philip Rahv, writing in Commentary, raises some of the same objections as Davis. He too asserts that the argument between Pyle and Fowler is facile and one-sided, contending that Greene states "his case with such glibness and plain malice that he invites us to discount him as a suspect witness" (489). Just as Davis criticizes Greene's suggestion that only the communist respects or understands the peasant, so Rahv argues that



Greene appears to admire [the Viet Minh's] efficiency and its closeness to the peasant masses--but the Communists are always "close to the masses" in the period of revolutionary conquest. The issue is what will happen later, when their power is consolidated and identification with the masses no longer serves Communist interests. One doubts that Greene is sufficiently political-minded to do justice to such considerations. (480)

Although he denounces Greene's "clever attack on the United States, its policies and methods, values and ideals," Rahv does not ultimately condemn Greene. Instead, Rahv tells his readers not "to become over-exercised about [The Quiet American]," since all Greene is doing is turning "the Jamesian theme of innocence vs. experience inside out" (480). By transforming Greene's criticism of U.S. policy in Indochina into a familiar dialogue about national character, Rahv diminishes the political import of The Quiet American, taming its potentially troubling message and making it amenable to the readers of Commentary.

A. J. Leibling, reviewing The Quiet American in the New Yorker, is far less tolerant of Greene's depiction of Pyle, particularly Pyle's involvement in mass murder. Leibling labels libelous the suggestion that the U.S. State Department encourages terrorism. "If the State Department had promoted the historical explosion," he writes, "we needed a new State Department" (153). Leibling is upset because "anybody who read the book would wonder whether the State Department was engaged in the

business of murdering French colonels, and in their default, friendly civilians" (153). Leibling is either ignorant or disingenuous, since the history of U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War was characterized by neither restraint nor excessive concern for the suffering of innocents. Years later, in his introduction to a new edition of The Quiet American, Greene spoke to Leibling's criticism, writing that "a Mr. Liebermann [sic], condemned me for accusing my 'best friends' (the Americans) of murder" ("Introduction" xviii). Greene went on to identify several reasons to believe U.S. officials had been involved in terrorist activities and suggested press complicity in keeping this information secret.<sup>4</sup> Like Davis in the New York Times, therefore, Leibling in the New Yorker accepts the basic morality of U.S. policy and reacts hostilely to Greene's suggestion that this policy is criminal. In reacting so fervently and in denying Greene's argument so completely, Davis and Leibling reveal both their and American literary culture's sympathy with the status quo belief in the benign and democratic nature of U.S. policy.

Time's anonymous reviewer demonstrates this complicity even more strikingly, asserting, "the Kremlin alone might pretend to believe that American Government officials abroad are prone to fool around with bombs." Time finds Greene guilty of anti-Americanism and suggests that he failed to recognize "one of the great facts of the 20th

century," one that has "baffled, beguiled and infuriated many minds"--"the phenomenon of U.S. good will." Time's belief in American good will is part of a Cold War Manichaeism apparent throughout the March 12, 1956 issue in which The Quiet American review appears.

For instance, in an article about the place of the Communist Party within Italian politics Time writes of "Krushchev's new python policy--embrace, constrict and devour" (32). Discussing British military aims, Time asserts that Sir Anthony Eden's military advisers had come

to a gloomy conclusion. They have now revised from ten to five years their estimate of the time it will take before Russian industrial strength reaches the point where the Communists may again be tempted to violent global conquest. (32)

While Time trumpets the alleged aims of Soviet militarism, it reports without comment tangible evidence of the harm caused by U.S. militarism. Time tells of Japanese scientists' findings that a nuclear explosion in Nevada had "dropped radioactive rain on much of Japan and radioactive dust on the northern island of Hokkaido" (73), that radioactive rain had fallen in Paris, and that "the fission products from far away Nevada had also fogged photographic film as they drifted over Europe" (74). Time reports these incidents matter-of-factly, its belief in U.S. good will unaffected by U.S. complicity in the spread of radiation across two continents.

Time also tells of how Guatemala had been "torn by bitter years of a Communist-written land reform that set peasant against landholder," a policy that had begun in 1952 by "Red-led" President Arbenz and that had resulted in land seizures "amid scenes of bloodshed and destruction." Time praises the 1956 reform (written with the advice of U.S. farm experts), which "provides for the well-compensated expropriation of idle parts of big estates and their division among the landless" (40). Missing from this account is any suggestion of U.S. economic interest in Guatemala. Arbenz's land reform had been initiated to diminish the power of the United Fruit Company, who owned property amounting to more than the combined property of half of Guatemala's landholding population, who owned Guatemala's telephone and telegraph facilities and all but 29 miles of its railroad track, and who in 1950 reported an annual profit that was, according to Richard H. Immerman, "more than twice the revenues of the entire Guatemalan government" (73). Missing too is recognition of the C.I.A.-led coup that toppled Arbenz. And in their praise for President Carlos Castillo Armas's attempt to raise "the agricultural health of all Guatemalans," Time does not reveal the all too familiar results of the phenomenon of U.S. good will--that Castillo Armas returned to United Fruit more than 99 percent of its expropriated lands (Immerman 198) and instigated a brutal authoritarian rule.

The Castillo Armas government disenfranchised three quarters of Guatemala's electorate; outlawed all political parties and labor organizations; began burning 'subversive' books (including Dostoevsky novels and Victor Hugo's Les Miserables). After eighteen months of Castillo Armas's rule, only one half of one percent of the peasants who had won plots under the Arbenz land reform program remained on their new land (Schlesinger and Kinzer 221-233). Castillo Armas destroyed the labor movement, outlawing more than five hundred unions and requiring that union charters be approved by the National Committee for Defense against Communism. The Armas government could declare any strike illegal and could sentence strikers to three years in prison. "By the end of the decade," writes Immerman,

Guatemala's union membership had fallen to ten thousand, one-tenth of the total during Arbenz's last year in office. In all of Latin America, only Haiti had fewer organized workers. (200)

I cite this information to explain the context in which The Quiet American was received and to identify something of the history that Greene sought to document. It has been thought that Pyle was based on Colonel Edward Geary Lansdale, a C.I.A. operative involved in a successful counter-insurgency program in the Philippines that resulted in the election of Ramon Magsaysay. After his success in the Philippines, Lansdale was sent to Vietnam.

Whether or not Pyle was modeled on Lansdale (Greene has denied this),<sup>5</sup> Lansdale's clandestine activities seem representative of the anti-democratic acts regularly conducted by the U.S. in Southeast Asia and elsewhere during the early 1950s. A report in the Pentagon Papers on Lansdale's covert team, the Saigon Military Mission, explains that he was "to undertake paramilitary operations against the enemy and to wage political-psychological warfare" (54). This operation included spreading stories about a Chinese Communist regiment raping village girls, compiling an almanac of famous North Vietnamese astrologers predicting disaster for the communists, contaminating the oil supply of the Hanoi bus company, and smuggling eight and half tons of supplies to a paramilitary group in the North. It is precisely this side of U.S. good will that Greene documents in The Quiet American and that reviewers in the New York Times, the New Yorker, and Time repudiate as false and polemical.

These reviewers seem unaware of the consistent consequences of U.S. opposition to indigenous anti-colonial movements. Just as the overthrow of Mossadegh in Iran led to the brutal reign of the Shah and the overthrow of Arbenz in Guatemala to the dictatorship of Armas, so opposition to the Viet Minh resulted in the despotism of Ngo Dinh Diem. Thwarting the nation-wide elections (which had been guaranteed by the Geneva Accords and which would have

ensured a communist electoral victory), the U.S. helped establish the Diem regime in South Vietnam.<sup>6</sup> While the Viet Minh had begun a policy of radical land reform, Diem instituted his own reform which, like the Armas reform in Guatemala, did little to redistribute land ownership. Diem's reforms, according to the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, "reduced rents which the Viet Minh had abolished, sold land which the Viet Minh had given away, and reestablished estates which the Viet Minh had broken up" (29). Diem's land reform, according to Mark Selden,

did nothing to alter landlord domination as the central fact of South Vietnamese rural life. The overwhelming number of landless farmers and tenants were completely bypassed by it. . . . In many areas it served primarily to provide cover for wresting land from the poor and restoring it to former landlords.  
(376)

According to The Pentagon Papers, by 1960 "45% of the land remained concentrated in the hands of 2% of landowners, and 15% of the landlords owned 75% of all the land" (qtd. in Truong Buu Lam 39).

In 1956, as The Quiet American was being repudiated by significant sections of the American literary establishment, Diem issued Ordinance 47, which called for the detention of people thought dangerous to the state, gave legal justification for the creation of political prison camps, and suspended habeas corpus (Fitzgerald 119). This

policy was administered by military tribunals who allowed no appeal and made being a communist or even working with one a capital offense (Kolko 89). According to Frances Fitzgerald,

In 1956 official estimates put the prison camp population at twenty thousand. . . . The camps . . . contained a wide variety of people, from the leaders of sects and the smaller political parties to the uncooperative members of the press and the trade unions. . . . In the period 1955-1959 . . . the Diemist officials arrested thousands of people whose only political sin was to have fought for independence against the French before Diem took power. Some of these people they killed on arrest, others they beat and tortured; still others they held for indefinite periods under inhuman conditions in order to extort money or confiscate their land. (120, 140-41)

It has been estimated that by the end of 1958 there were 40,000 political prisoners in South Vietnam and that between 1955 and 1957 the Diem regime was responsible for 12,000 deaths (Kolko 89). By March 1962, according to figures compiled by the National Liberation Front, 105,000 former resistance supporters had been killed and 350,000 (including 6,000 children) were being held in 874 prisons and concentration camps (Burchett 71). John McDermott summarizes Diem's policies and their consequences:

by a system of totalitarian controls, by a series of military expeditions against its own peasantry, and by the forced regroupment of almost the entire rural population did the Government of the Republic of Vietnam attempt to pacify the countryside. In a period of eight years the entire social system of the countryside was destroyed. (9)



Diem's tyranny, besides revealing the fraudulence of U.S. good will, demonstrates the often destructive consequences of U.S. foreign policy, consequences Greene depicts in The Quiet American.

Not all critics denounced Greene or thought this portrayal of American global terror unbelievable. American literary culture's reaction to The Quiet American was not lock-step anticommunism; instead, there was a measure of ideological diversity, as demonstrated by Walter Allen's review in the Nation. According to Allen,

Greene expresses a criticism of America and especially of American behavior in foreign affairs that is widely held, if not openly stated, by a great many people outside the United States. (344)

But instead of looking at Pyle, the emodiment of American policy, Allen concentrates on the initially neutral observer, Fowler. Ignoring Greene's publisher's assertion that "religion plays little or no part" in The Quiet American, Allen sees in Fowler "the hall mark of the Greene man, whether presented as Catholic or atheist: the sense of abandonment" (344). Rather than discussing the specific evil wrought by Pyle to thwart communism, Allen discusses "the awareness of evil; the awareness of two worlds side by side--heaven and hell--yet with how many leagues between them" (345). And he cites Greene's saying years ago that "Human nature is not black and white but

black and grey" (344). A specific political indictment becomes for Allen a speculation on the metaphysics (and chromatics) of evil. While it is certainly possible to read The Quiet American in the context of Greene's concern with alienation and spiritual exhaustion, doing so diverts attention from the book's historical urgency. Thus in the left-most journal within commercial American literary culture, the political content of Greene's novel is exorcised in favor of an analysis of the nature of evil.

Like Allen, John Lehmann in the New Republic dismisses Greene's publisher's assertion that religion plays little or no part in The Quiet American, suggesting instead that "the religious theme is there all the same, as anyone can see" (26). Lehmann praises Greene's masterly story construction and declares The Quiet American "a highly skilled work of fiction by one of our major literary craftsmen" (27). For Lehmann the stature of The Quiet American depends not on the book's religious thematizing or Greene's technical expertise but on his depiction of contemporary warfare, on "the theme of the wastefulness and the cruelty of war" (26) and "the ultimate ethics of all wars of liberation" (27). Thus, although sympathetic to his politics and his interpretation of events in Indochina, neither Allen nor Lehmann focuses on Greene's critique of the murderous consequences of U.S. foreign policy. In the initial critical reception of The Quiet Ameri-

can, therefore, we find mainstream American literary culture attacking Greene's politics, while the marginalized, left-liberal side of this culture distances itself from Greene's specific critique to speak broadly about his "awareness of evil" (Allen 345) and his "tragic vision of modern life" (Lehmann 27). This collapsing of Greene's politics into a general concern for evil and tragedy--exemplified by Allen's view that Greene "is always willing to have a go at authority, whether the State Department or the Catholic Church" (345)--has helped curtail examination of the history informing Greene's narrative and has helped depoliticize subsequent academic criticism on The Quiet American.

This absence of a leftist critique was due to the dominance of a formalist understanding of literary worth, to a willful ignorance about the nature of American global policy, and to a widely endorsed anticommunism. Because it was viewed through a narrow critical lens that obscured Greene's politics and his attack on the conduct of American policy, The Quiet American could be seen (as Allen and Lehmann's reviews demonstrate) as a work of serious literary merit and could also become a best-seller. Yet even this apolitical recognition of The Quiet American generated flak that was meant to constrain discourse and control dissent by "regularly assailing, threatening, and 'correcting'. . . [thus] trying to contain any deviations

from the established line" (Herman and Chomsky 28).<sup>7</sup> An editorial in the Saturday Evening Post (headlined "To Get Rave Reviews, Write an Anti-U.S.A. Novel!") declared The Quiet American "an obvious piece of Hate-America propaganda," a "bitter tirade . . . presented as a novel," and a "propaganda tract." Greene was attacked as a communist and an opium smoker, causing the Post to "wonder whether the preposterous statements in his book came to him in a pipe dream." And the Post attacked newspaper reviewers for spending "so much time reading fiction that they do not know some elementary facts about their own country."<sup>8</sup>

The Saturday Evening Post was not the only mainstream periodical to go beyond the confines of book reviews to attack The Quiet American. Responding to Soviet acclaim for Greene's novel, Newsweek declared Soviet critics had

found a key to the secrets of the novel. All the leading characters turn out to be cut-and-dried political symbols, rather than the complex fragments of humanity which Greene intended (but hardly achieved).  
(96)

In its repudiation of this vulgar Marxist reading, Newsweek endorsed an ostensibly apolitical reading of The Quiet American that echoed the assessment made in left-liberal journals like the Nation and the New Republic. After all, there is no great difference between Newsweek's "complex fragments of humanity," Allen's "human nature . .

. not black and white but black and grey," and Lehmann's "tragic vision of modern life." All three readings replace U.S. action in Vietnam with general concerns for the human condition and thus diminish Greene's political critique. Unlike the Saturday Evening Post, however, which chastised the literary establishment, Newsweek praised American literary critics for objecting to "the one-sidedness of [Greene's] viewpoint and the dreary stereotyping of his American characters." Newsweek hoped that Greene would take this criticism more seriously "now that the Communists have proved the woodenness of his characters by making them over so effortlessly into Marxist stereotypes" (96).

Likewise, in Commentary Diana Trilling red-baited Greene, declaring that it would be difficult to find a clearer example than The Quiet American "of what neutralism means, or clearer evidence of its essential non-neutrality and of the pro-Communism which it so regularly masks" (66). However, Trilling's main target is not Greene's novel but Rahv's review. Trilling wonders why Rahv wants to mitigate Greene's offense, wants to suggest that Americans should not be indignant at "Mr. Greene's unjust attack." To Trilling, Rahv's review demonstrates American liberalism's "endemic guiltiness," "fear of nationalistic pride," and "fear of conformity" (67). Ultimately, according to Trilling, Rahv's mild critique of The

Quiet American reveals that American liberals have "no preference for the Soviet Union as against the United States, and no philosophical preference for Communism as against democracy" (68).

There was, then, a general sympathy between the dominant ideology in the United States and the critical evaluations of The Quiet American that appeared in the mass media.<sup>9</sup> The immediate reception of The Quiet American, therefore, reveals the parameters of accepted discourse within commercial American literary culture: Greene's discussion of U.S. policy in Vietnam was (1) consistently criticized for its anti-Americanism and pro-communism or (2) ignored in favor of the novel's more transcendent human concerns. In no mainstream periodical did a reviewer focus on the accuracy of Greene's analysis of U.S. policy, let alone critique him for having too benign a view of U.S. imperialism.

### The Critics

Admittedly, it would be misleading to judge academic literary culture based on reviews of The Quiet American that appeared in mass circulation magazines and gatekeeper intellectual journals in 1956. These periodicals comprise only a small part of--and the overt anticommunism of this period is unrepresentative of--American literary culture. Since this initial reception, academic critics have been

strangely quiet about The Quiet American. Although it inspired an initial examination (articles in 1957, 1959, and 1963), no scholarly article devoted exclusively to The Quiet American appears again in the M.L.A. Bibliography until 1979. This period coincides with the war and its immediate aftermath, beginning a year before the Gulf of Tonkin resolution and concluding a year before the election of Ronald Reagan. I suspect this timing is not mere coincidence but stems from critics' discomfort writing about and scholarly journals' discomfort publishing articles about a novel that dealt so seemingly contentiously with such a divisive issue. As of this writing, the M.L.A. lists a total of five articles on The Quiet American in refereed scholarly journals.<sup>10</sup> By way of contrast, the M.L.A. lists 20 articles on The Power and the Glory, 17 on The Heart of the Matter, and 14 on Brighton Rock. Clearly, for American literary culture, The Quiet American is a paler shade of Greene.

Its place in the Greene canon notwithstanding, one might have expected the historic importance of and the controversy surrounding The Quiet American to have generated further critical attention. The inability of earlier critics to examine Greene's critique of U.S. policy, his depiction of war in Indochina, and his representations of the Vietnamese is understandable, considering these critics were constrained by a formalist paradigm and were

faced with an unexpected shift in Greene's thematic focus (from religious to political).<sup>11</sup> For later critics, however, who could more easily utilize a political methodology and who had long recognized Greene's turn to the political,<sup>12</sup> this reluctance to examine the socio-political dynamic of The Quiet American is surprising. For whatever reason (postmodernists' disinterest in realist fiction, conservative critics' interest in Greene's Catholicism, Vietnam War critics' concentration on American writers) the transformation and politicization of literary studies has not significantly affected criticism on The Quiet American. In the nearly 40 years since it was published, critics have maintained a remarkably consistent dialogue about The Quiet American, (A) identifying and dismissing accusations that Greene was anti-American; (B) focusing on existential and religious themes and on Greene's literary technique; (C) replacing the novel's specific historical context and political critique with a broad concern for the human condition; and (D) praising its complex, ambiguous, and equivocal moral and political argument.

(A) Anti-Americanism. Repeatedly during the 1950s and 1960s literary critics defended Greene from charges of anti-Americanism, Robert O. Evans arguing that "One should not imply . . . that Mr. Greene himself is anti-American" (247) and R.E. Hughes explaining that "too many readers



were quick to discover, or invent, evidence that here was a bit of anti-American propaganda" (41). "Criticized by American reviewers for its supposed anti-Americanism," writes A.A. DeVitis, "The Quiet American has been misunderstood" (117). Likewise, Philip Stratford dismisses "the indignation that The Quiet American aroused in the United States" (311).

In the 1980s critics would seem to have little need to defend Greene from accusations several decades old and made during the height of McCarthyism, especially with the alleged radicalizing of literary studies. Yet in their examinations of The Quiet American contemporary literary critics have continued to temper Greene's anti-Americanism. George M.A. Gaston, for instance, argues that the anti-American element has "more to do with the fate of Fowler than with that of the world at large" and is "less symptomatic of [Fowler's] politics than of his intellectual and emotional condition" (93), and Roger Sharrock sees it as "more a vehicle for expressing the nature of the conflict between Pyle and Fowler than intrinsically significant" (216).

This desire to disable Greene's critique, to see its origins in something other than American policy, has resulted in an assortment of justifications. In 1956 book reviewers suggested Greene's anti-Americanism might be due to his having been denied an entry visa because of youth-

ful membership in the Communist Party, as well as to his having lost a libel suit (for suggesting Shirley Temple's precocious sexuality).<sup>13</sup> Critics have attributed Greene's hostility toward America to "loss of childhood and the pains of growth" (Sharrock 216), "cultural snobbery" (Kelly 16), and a "dislike for the suburban Protestant materialism of England" (Spurling 54). Whatever the arguments put forth to explain Greene's enmity toward the U.S., critics have refused to see his criticism as rooted in American conduct in Indochina, thus seeming to share a belief in (or at least an uncritical examination of) the benign motivation of U.S. foreign policy. "Anti-Americanism" is uniformly understood as a pejorative term, not as a reasonable response to U.S.-sponsored terror. No critic argues that Greene is justifiably anti-American or that he is not anti-American enough.<sup>14</sup>

(B) Themes and Technique. In lieu of a discussion of Greene's critique of American policy in Indochina, critics, in seeking to defend him, have focused on the more familiarly literary aspects of The Quiet American. Greene depicts in gruesome detail the appalling consequences of the anti-colonial war in Vietnam, as in this description of a massacre in Phat Diem:

The canal was full of bodies; I am reminded now of an Irish stew containing too much meat. The bodies overlapped; one head, seal-grey, and anonymous as a convict with a shaven scalp, stuck up out of the wa-

ter like a buoy. . . . [A soldier] had found a punt hidden in some bushes down the canal. . . . Six of us got in, and he began to pole it towards the other bank, but we ran on a shoal of bodies and stuck. He pushed away with his pole, sinking it into this human clay, and one body was released and floated up all its length beside the boat, like a bather lying in the sun. (44)

Although acknowledging that Greene "seems to understand the situation in Indo-China" and sees "beyond the news reports" (246), Evans ignores the factual basis of such passages and what they reveal about American policy, focusing instead upon a French existentialist political philosophy that "goes a long way towards explaining the anti-Americanism of the novel" (247). Criticism of the The Quiet American has consistently ignored its political/historical context for the sake of discussions of Greene's existentialism and other peripheral concerns. There is something almost unseemly about a literary culture that privileged such readings, that in examining The Quiet American found Western philosophy more significant than Western imperialism, French existentialism more significant than French colonialism. Even when faced with passages such as the description of the Phat Diem massacre, critics could write, as Evans did, "The geographical setting of The Quiet American is Indo-China, but the intellectual milieu is French" (243). This aestheticism and ahistoricism was common to literary formalism, and it set the tone for subsequent critical investigations of The Quiet American.

The transformation of literary studies that has occurred within the last 20 years, not to mention the decade-long American war in Vietnam, would seem to promise a more politicized understanding of The Quiet American. Yet in his 1983 examination of Greene's fiction, Gangeshwar Rai does little more than expand Evans's argument. Instead of discussing Greene's representation of Vietnam's struggle to free itself from Western rule, Rai suggests that Greene "presents the problem of existence and essence and shows the significance of free existence deciding essence" (74). According to Rai, Greene is "attracted towards individual's [sic] freedom of choice or his engagement which lies at the heart of Sartrean existentialism" (75).<sup>15</sup> This focus on Greene's existentialism transforms a novel about an ongoing struggle for independence and social justice into a metaphysical treatise and is one way in which literary culture has elided the real-world concerns addressed by Greene in The Quiet American.

In addition to reading it existentially, literary critics, while recognizing that The Quiet American did not maintain the overt Catholic thematizing of Greene's earlier novels, nonetheless have concentrated on his use of religious themes. Acknowledging that The Quiet American "does not deal explicitly with Catholic themes," Kunkel declares he will "examine it in connection with the Catholic novels, because it has a religious theme" (148).

Likewise, Francis Wyndham sees The Quiet American as a moral and religious tale. Although "it was suggested that [Greene] had temporarily abandoned religious themes," writes Wyndham, "the same complex moral problems, the pity and the anger" (23) can be found here. And Philip Stratford suggests that in The Quiet American Greene simply translates the problem of "commitment to religious belief" to "the sphere of politics" (308).

Ignoring the widespread suffering and brutality brought about by an anti-colonial war, critics have focused on individual Christian suffering and guilt. Yet Greene repeatedly documents the horrors of the war; the novel turns on Fowler's vivid recounting of the bloody consequences of a State Department-sponsored terrorist bombing:

bits of cars were scattered over the square; and a man without his legs lay twitching at the edge of the ornamental gardens. . . . The doctors were too busy to attend to the dead, and so the dead were left to their owners, for one can own the dead as one owns a chair. A woman sat on the ground with what was left of her baby in her lap; with a kind of modesty she had covered it with her straw peasant hat. . . . The legless torso at the edge of the garden still twitched, like a chicken which has lost its head. (155-56)

Discussing Pyle's involvement in this massacre (a massacre Greene identifies as based on historical fact and which he ascribes to U.S. counter-terrorism), Miriam Allott does not

consider what Greene reveals about U.S. policy but declares, "it is at this point . . . that one becomes aware of the thematic continuity linking this book with Greene's 'Catholic' novels" (198). Greene documents many other wartime brutalities, including the dropping of U.S.-supplied napalm by the French, as well as a French pilot's attack on helpless Vietnamese:

The cannon gave a single burst of tracer, and the sampan blew apart in a shower of sparks. We didn't even wait to see our victims struggling to survive, but climbed and made for home. (144)

Instead of discussing the Vietnamese burned by napalm or killed by U.S.-supplied weapons, however, Kunkel writes, "God and the ultimates burn in the background . . . in the foreground blaze adultery and guilt" (149). Similarly, instead of a war between the Vietnamese and the French, a war between Vietnamese nationalism and Western imperialism, Stratford sees the novel's "dramatic antagonism" as between

youth and age, innocence and experience, romanticism and realism, between Pyle's naive faith and Fowler's tired skepticism, between the energetic meddling of the one, and the impotent non-intervention of the other. (309)

By 1964 when Stratford's book was published, Vietnam was front page news. In 1963 Diem was murdered in a U.S.-

sanctioned coup, the number of American military advisers reached 15,000, and Buddhist monks' self-immolation gained world-wide attention; in 1964 Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, the U.S. flew 5,000 air combat missions, and American troop strength reached 23,000 (Clodfelter 1229). Yet Stratford seems oblivious to what The Quiet American might reveal about any of this, arguing instead that its central attitude is Christian. In their discussions of Greene's Christianity, Stratford, Kunkel, and others demonstrate how the established practice of literary analysis, particularly its concentration on traditional themes, can aestheticize and thus obscure a work's political and historical content.

Focusing on the literary and religious heritage Greene draws upon, Stratford and Kunkel make no attempt to place Greene's religious concerns within a Vietnamese social and political context. No critic seems at all self-conscious about discussing Greene's Christian themes as they play out in a country with a minority Catholic population, a religious minority that has long collaborated with the French and has consistently supported French colonial rule. According to Fitzgerald,

the non-Catholic Vietnamese believed with some justification that the Catholics had acted as a fifth column for the French in the period preceding the conquest. Certainly the French had always shown great favoritism towards the Catholics, turning them into a self-conscious elitist minority. (108)

In attempting to impose its political and economic agenda upon Vietnam through the Diem government, the U.S. also relied upon the Catholic minority. Diem was Catholic, led an overwhelmingly Catholic administration, and granted special privileges to Catholic villages. One reason the U.S. encouraged the migration of Catholic refugees from the North was because they were Diem's only popular constituency. In assessing the religious dimensions of The Quiet American, critics have largely ignored this important history. While recent critics have not emphasized the religious dimensions of Greene's novel, they have nonetheless continued to discuss these. Gaston, for example, argues that "although war and politics are prominent issues in the book, they serve to poise the ultimate concern of personal salvation" (93). Gaston sees Pyle, the murderous instrument of U.S. foreign policy, as a "paradoxical savior" and thinks Fowler "headed for a spiritual recovery" (94). To Gwenn R. Boardman, The Quiet American "extends the religious perspective" and "shows one way in which modern man may begin to approach God" (108).

By translating the political into the philosophical and the religious, critics have revealed their allegiance to a formalist literary aesthetic, their reliance upon conventional literary themes, and their discomfort with Greene's politics. The consistency with which literary critics, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, minimized



the novel's anti-American politics and displaced this with a focus on broad moral and religious issues illustrates how effectively literary convention may be used to mask a history that brings into question the very premises of American liberal pluralist ideology.

Besides offering existential and Christian readings to justify their focus on The Quiet American, critics have written about the novel's formal and technical elements. Acknowledging the initial controversy surrounding The Quiet American, that it was viewed as "a bit of anti-American propaganda" and that "the air grew . . . thick with jingoism," Hughes does not seek to counter this criticism with reference to Greene's ideology or even to his thematic concerns but with discussion of Greene's narrative method. The problem with the attack on The Quiet American, for Hughes, is "that the novel qua novel was considerably obscured" and "the point most obscured . . . was the complexity of Greene's narrative technique" (41). Similarly, for Stratford, "In view of the indignation that The Quiet American aroused in the United States . . . it is necessary to doubly underline a few facts about the novel as novel" (311). And Wyndham argues that The Quiet American deserves "an important place among Greene's serious fiction" because of "the neat complexity of the story, and the fine descriptive passages" (24). For Wyndham, whose book was published in the year of the Tet offensive, the

novel's importance does not rest upon what Greene reveals about U.S. involvement but merely upon its narrative complexity and its brilliant description. Even at the height of the war, then, literary critics severed The Quiet American from its historical roots and judged it on aesthetic grounds.

Later critics have continued to discuss Greene's narrative technique in lieu of his politics. Brian Thomas argues that "while The Quiet American is about colonialism, it is also, more simply, a love story and an adventure story" (26-27). Thomas goes on to discuss The Quiet American as a romance, reading the deadly anticommunist Pyle as "a highly conventional type of romance hero" (27) and the canal in Phat Diem as "a river in a mythically 'lower' world" (33). Thomas removes the novel's historic setting and political content; the war-torn landscape becomes a "figuratively annihilated landscape." The peasants who saw their culture shattered, their countryside torn apart, and their fellow citizens slaughtered by U.S.-supplied, French-delivered weapons would have been relieved to learn that, according to Thomas, they are experiencing "the central metaphorical form of the nether region of [Fowler's] own romance" (36). Similarly, when Boardman discusses Greene's critique of the U.S., he asserts it "is largely aesthetic" (102). By continuing the discussion of existential and religious themes and

Greene's narrative technique, recent criticism on The Quiet American does not reveal a radically new and politicized literary culture but a culture that in its preoccupations and its literary analyses seems a continuation of the older, formalist literary establishment, a culture too that seems so dominated by a Western perspective that it cannot consider the actual human suffering of the Vietnamese that Greene so carefully documents.

(C) The Human Condition. In keeping with this concentration on aesthetics and on broadly philosophical and moral themes, analyses of The Quiet American often have replaced its specific historical context with a discussion of humanity in general. Kunkel argues that The Quiet American can best be understood if we "enlarge our perspective by abandoning Greene's views on American foreign policy and turning our attention to literary issues" (150). This enlarged perspective, however, does not include the Vietnamese struggle for independence and the murderous consequences of American opposition to the Viet Minh. According to Kunkel, by concentrating on issues such as these we are "misrouting attention from profound moral and religious issues . . . [and] obscur(ing) the fact that this novel . . . reflects la condition humaine" (153).

Allott also reads The Quiet American in broadly human terms, examining "its feelings for the anomalies which

surround most human attempts to achieve [effective moral action], and its assertion nevertheless of certain enduring human values" (188). The extent of Allott's consideration of the political and historical situation in The Quiet American appears in her suggestion that

we need Pyle's courage and none of his ignorance, Fowler's moral intelligence and none of his indecisiveness, if we are to find a way out of the alarming difficulties which as nations and individuals we are most of us nowadays required to face. (206)

Allott identifies Fowler as both moral and intelligent and implicates us in his struggle yet ignores what Fowler's morality and intelligence have instructed him to do--thwart U.S. terror and support the Viet Minh. Having internalized the formal preoccupations of American literary culture, Allott can make no more specific political statement than to warn us of "alarming difficulties." Moving beyond textual analysis to address her readers directly and connect us to the important political concerns "we are most of us nowadays required to face," Allott, ultimately, can do very little.

DeVitis also concerns himself with the human condition, arguing that The Quiet American is "primarily about human beings involved in an ethical dilemma" (116). Both Allott in focusing on "effective moral action" and DeVitis in focusing on the novel's "ethical dilemma" universalize

the specific question Greene poses--what should a neutral individual do when confronted with the lethal excesses of imperialism? As Greene's assertion that he would go to almost any length to thwart U.S. imperialism suggests, Fowler's dilemma need not be read as a general human predicament. Yet DeVitis sees Greene not as critiquing the immorality of U.S. foreign policy through Alden Pyle but as showing "that idealism, when uninformed by experience, is a dangerous weapon in a world coerced by the cult of power" (118). To DeVitis, rather than an individual location with a history of colonial oppression and with an ongoing struggle for liberation, Vietnam (specifically Saigon) "becomes a microcosm that reflects much of twentieth-century political thinking" (117). This formulation allows DeVitis to dismiss U.S. policy and to ignore the perspective of colonial subjects. DeVitis also argues that Fowler's decision to help the Viet Minh assassinate Pyle is not so much a political act based on opposition to U.S. policy but an act of human compassion. Fowler has not aligned himself with the Viet Minh and against the U.S., according to DeVitis, but has "taken sides to remain human, and the realization of his compassionate spirit overwhelms him" (120).

In the 1970s and 1980s critics have continued to supplant the novel's historical/political background with a focus on the human condition. Although asserting that

"Fowler discovers the realities of a river filled with bloated bodies, civilians dead in the path of war (113)," Boardman argues that "The Quiet American is a 'morality' designed to show Everyman how to become conscious of today's distressing and Absurd condition" (116), and Fowler is "The twentieth-century Everyman recogniz[ing] his sin" (110). Similarly, Sharrock argues that "These scraps of history are by an act of metonymy made to indicate the whole weight of instant history upon modern man" (202). A dead child in a ditch, "with its legs drawn up embryo-like," to Sharrock is suggestive of "the weakness of modern man without supernatural aid" (206). And Gaston finds the presence of violence important not because of what it reveals about U.S. intervention in Vietnam but "because it is the one pure emotion that joins the primitive with the modern world" (57). The brutal conditions in Vietnam for Gaston are not meant to demonstrate the harm caused by Western imperialism but to show that "the experience of modern man is filled with rot and squalor" (94). Likewise, Rai writes, "the setting insists on the meaninglessness of human condition [sic]" (75).

Reading the war-ravaged Vietnamese landscape as symbolic of the modern condition and the novel as speaking to enduring human qualities, literary critics have consistently diminished Greene's political concerns and discounted the U.S. role in promoting this war. By univer-

salizing this text, removing its link to a particular history and culture, and converting its political commentary into a metaphorical statement about the modern condition, critics have undermined the potential of The Quiet American to warn about American policy in Vietnam before it escalated, to explain something about how this war began while the war was ongoing, and to counter the nationalist rewriting of this history that has taken place within the last two decades.

(D) Moral Complexity. Critics have further dehistoricized and depoliticized The Quiet American by stressing the ambiguity and complexity of Greene's moral argument. The ambiguity endorsed by literary critics mystifies the systemic effects of existing social relations. Similarly, the complexity that critics find in Greene's fiction denies him the ability to make moral distinctions. Instead, critics argue that Greene is critical of both the Viet Minh and the Americans; that is, he is critical of ideological thinking in general. For instance, Spurling (writing in 1964) asserts that Fowler takes the side of "the murdered Vietnamese . . . against Pyle and his American bosses" as well as "Pyle's side against his (Fowler's) own . . . cowardly betrayal to the communists" (57). Writing in 1983, Rai argues that Fowler's "attitude toward the Communists as well as the Americans seems to reflect Greene's own hatred for Communism . . . and his antipathy

towards America" (76). Similarly, Salvatore (writing in 1988) extols Greene's writings because "a sufficient amount of ambiguity results in [his] fiction, which forces readers to decide whether an attack or a defense has been mounted" (51). This praise for Greene's alleged neutrality, his ability to hold opposing positions, is consistent with a formalist privileging of paradox and ambiguity, as Stratford makes clear with his assertion that Greene has a "paradoxically ambivalent attitude. One cannot expect from him either extreme of commitment or non-commitment" (313). In praising Greene's ambivalence, Stratford repeats New Critical dogma, while for later critics like Spurling, Rai, and Salvatore, this favorable assessment of the equivocal politics of The Quiet American is evidence of the lingering formalism and centrism that exists within contemporary scholarship.

This preference for ambivalence over commitment is a hallmark of liberalism. It is the kind of ostensibly honest and self-critical politics advocated by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. in The Vital Center. For Schlesinger,

Against totalitarian certitude, free society can only offer modern man devoured by alienation and fallibility. The great issue of this century is who is right. Is man a creature of doubt and ambiguity? . . . Or has he mastered the secrets of history and nature sufficiently to become ruthless, monolithic, infallible, to know whom to spare and whom to kill?  
(57)



Critical praise for Greene's lack of commitment and his repudiation of "abstract ideological conviction" (Rai 80) echoes a long-standing conceit of cold war liberalism--an anticommunism that positions itself as rational, centrist, and non-dogmatic. Whereas for Schlesinger "the totalitarian left and the totalitarian right meet at last on the murky grounds of tyranny and terror" (ix-x),<sup>16</sup> liberalism "is the spirit of the center--the spirit of human decency, opposing the extremes of tyranny" (256).

In the context of a novel about American policy in Vietnam, this centrist valorization of ambivalence is far from neutral. First, it distorts Greene's position; he is sympathetic to Vietnamese anti-colonialism and opposed to U.S. policy. At times Greene has forthrightly denied his neutrality, arguing that "the temptation to double allegiance tends to disappear before American capitalism and imperialism" (qtd. in Allain 90). Second, since this alleged liberal ambivalence and ambiguity was nowhere in evidence in U.S. policy, which consistently opposed the Vietnamese communists, and since the U.S. was vastly more powerful economically and militarily than the Viet Minh, this ambivalence, this refusal to take sides effectively supported U.S. policy.

During the decade that followed the publication of The Quiet American the U.S. pursued a brutal war against the Vietnamese communists. Embracing a range of lethal

technologies and strategies, the U.S. fought a war in three countries, generating massive economic and environmental damage, dispossessing countless Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians, and causing upwards of 2 million deaths, horrors already in evidence in the 1950s and documented by Greene in The Quiet American. Against this murderous background, American literary culture has viewed The Quiet American almost exclusively in terms of its religious and moral themes and its aesthetic features. The dominance of New Criticism, with its implicitly ahistorical and ostensibly apolitical methodology, caused a novel about the roots of U.S. involvement in Vietnam to be seen as an examination of the human condition. Even with the onset of a newer, more politicized methodology, literary critics have persisted in refuting Greene's anti-Americanism, in emphasizing conventional themes, in universalizing a specific political critique, and in praising a "real world which is not black and white, but grey" (Sharrock 207). Whether read as Red, black-and-white, or grey, Greene has consistently been rebuked and revised to accord with a liberal pluralist ideology.

## Notes

1. Salvatore 59; Greene qtd. in Allain 90.

2. There was general agreement about the Viet Minh's popular support. In 1953, Senator John F. Kennedy argued that "Despite any wishful thinking to the contrary, it should be apparent that the popularity and prevalence of Ho Chi Minh and his following throughout Indochina would cause either partition or a coalition government to result in eventual domination by the communists." Likewise, President Eisenhower wrote that he had "never talked or corresponded with a person knowledgeable in Indochinese affairs who did not agree that had an election been held at the time of the fighting (1954), possibly 80 percent of the population would have voted for the Communist Ho Chi Minh as their leader" (qtd. in Joseph 87). And in 1954 Joseph Alsop declared, "The Vietminh could not possibly have carried on with the resistance for one year, let alone nine years, without the people's strong, united support" (qtd. in Committee 17).

3. This "domino theory" was a consistent justification for U.S. political and military involvement in Indochina. President Eisenhower, for instance, argued that Asia

has already lost some 450 million of its peoples to the Communist dictatorship, and we simply can't afford greater losses. . . . the loss of Indochina, of Burma, of Thailand, of the Peninsula, and Indonesia,

now you . . . are talking about millions and millions and millions of people. . . . the possible consequences of the loss are just incalculable to the free world. (34)

4. In his 1973 introduction Greene explains some of the historical background that shaped The Quiet American. According to Greene,

The Life photographer at the moment of the explosion was so well placed that he was able to take an astonishing and horrifying photograph which showed the body of a puss-puss driver still upright after his legs had been blown off. This photograph was reproduced in an American propaganda magazine published in Manila over a title 'the work of Ho Chi Minh,' although General The had promptly and proudly claimed the bomb as his own. . . . There was certainly evidence of contacts between the American services and 'General' The. A jeep with the bodies of two American women was found by a French rubber planter. . . . presumably they had been killed by the Viet Minh, but what were they doing on the plantation? The bodies were promptly collected by the American embassy, and nothing more was heard of the incident. Not a word appeared in the Press. An American Consul was arrested late at night on the bridge to Dakow . . . carrying plastic bombs in his car. Again the incident was hushed up for diplomatic reasons. ("Introduction" xviii-xix)

5. "I grow tired of denying," Greene wrote to the London Sunday Telegraph, "that there is any connection between my character Pyle in The Quiet American and General Lansdale, the American counter-insurgency expert whom I have never had the misfortune to meet" (Yours 127).

6. In an election limited to the South and with a choice between two candidates, Diem and Bao Dai, Diem won

98.2 percent of the vote, including 605,025 votes from the 450,000 registered voters in Saigon (Young 53). Having been outlawed, the Viet Minh and the Communist Party could not present candidates in the 1956 elections.

7. Herman and Chomsky see flak as generated outside of and targeted at the media (i.e., institutional advertising, right-wing monitoring and think-tank operations designed to attack the media). I am arguing here that the media, too, generates flak in order to discredit opinion that does not accord with its own centrist ideology.

8. Among these facts was that the U.S. "was rushing food and other supplies into Vietnam for the refugees." Also, the Post claimed that The Quiet American "implies that the communists love the Asian peasants and that America shouldn't help anti-communists like President Diem of South Vietnam, even if the Reds conquer all Asia." Besides the familiar inability to distinguish Vietnamese anti-colonialism from global communism, the Post here ignores much about U.S. policy in Vietnam.

In identifying the food and other supplies the U.S. was sending the refugees, the Post distorts the true nature of U.S. aid. According to The Pentagon Papers, between 1954-1961 more than 75% of U.S. economic aid went to the South Vietnamese military, while the "aid for agriculture and transportation principally funded projects with strategic purposes and with an explicit military ratio-

nale." For instance, one 20-mile stretch of highway from Saigon to Bien Hoa that had been requested by General Samuel T. Williams for specifically military purposes "received more U.S. economic aid than all funds provided for labor, community development, social welfare, health, and education in the years 1954-1961" (qtd. in Truong Buu Lam 39).

Also, the refugees alluded to by the Post fled the North upon the end of the French-Indochinese War and the establishment of the Ho Chi Minh-led government in Hanoi. Although the Post proudly points to the aid given these refugees by the U.S., it does not reveal the part the U.S. played in facilitating this migration of a million Catholics. As Marilyn Young makes clear, this exodus was encouraged by the Catholic hierarchy and organized by Lansdale and his team. Entire parishes," she writes, "were carried south in American ships, following priests who told them Christ had moved south, as well as making promises of land and livelihood." According to Young, Lansdale developed a rumor campaign "that the United States would back a new war, one in which atomic weapons would certainly be used" (45).

Also missing from the Post's criticism of The Quiet American is recognition that the Diem regime and the very establishment of a South Vietnamese nation violated the Geneva Accords, since the division of Vietnam was a provi-

sional arrangement that was to last no longer than three hundred days. That the Post should ignore these points is no surprise; it had, after all, run articles declaring South Vietnam "the Bright Spot in Asia" and claiming that "Two years ago at Geneva, South Vietnam was virtually sold down the river to the Communists." "This spunky little Asian country," the Post wrote, "is back on its own feet, thanks to a 'mandarin in a sharkskin suit who's upsetting the Red timetable'" (qtd. in Fitzgerald 114).

9. Although I am suggesting an institutional sympathy, not a conspiracy to shape belief, it is worth noting that according to Michael Parenti,

In the early 1950s some 400 to 600 journalists were in the pay of the CIA. . . . At least twenty-five news organizations have served the CIA, including the Washington Post, the New York Times, CBS, ABC, NBC, Time, Newsweek, the Associated Press, United Press International, the Hearst newspapers, the Scripps-Howard newspapers, U.S. News and World Report, and the Wall Street Journal. . . . In the early 1950s a news story claiming that China was sending troops to Vietnam to help insurgents fight against the French proved to be a CIA fabrication. The agency induced the New York Times to remove a reporter, Sidney Gruson, from a story about the CIA-inspired overthrow of a democratic government in Guatemala because he was getting too close to uncovering the U.S. plot.  
(232-33)

The academic community, too, had substantial ties with the C.I.A. and the State Department. In 1966 C.I.A. director Admiral William F. Raborn declared,

in actual numbers [the C.I.A.] could easily staff the faculty of a university with our experts. In a way, we do. Many of those who leave us join the faculties of universities and colleges. Some of our own personnel take leave of absence to teach and renew their contacts in the academic world.

In the same year State Department Under-Secretary for Administration William J. Crockett claimed,

The colleges and universities provide [the State Department] with a rich body of information about many subjects, countries, and people prepared for many clients and purposes. For example, the United States Government is spending \$30 million this year on foreign affairs studies in American universities. . . . [the State Department has] a file on more than 5,000 foreign affairs studies now underway in American universities. Our foreign affairs documentation center lends out to State Department officers and officers of other agencies 400 unpublished academic papers each month. The Department receives each month over 200 new academic papers. (qtd. in Windmiller 121)

10. Robert O. Evans, "Existentialism in Greene's The Quiet American," Modern Fiction Studies 3 (1957): 241-48; R. E. Hughes, "The Quiet American: The Case Reopened," Renaissance 12.1 (1959): 41+; Georg M. A. Gaston, "The Structure of Salvation in The Quiet American," Renaissance 31 (1979): 93-106; Lisa Vargo, "The Quiet American and 'A Mr. Lieberman,'" English Language Notes 21.4 (1984): 63-70; Zakia Pathak, Saswati Senupta and Sharmila Purkayastha, "The Prison House of Orientalism," Textual Practice 5.2 (1991): 195-218.



11. The only exceptions to this apolitical, New Critical reading of The Quiet American during the period 1957-1970 appeared, not surprisingly, in Soviet and East German literary journals: Anna Elistratova, "Graham Greene and His New Novel," Soviet Literature VIII (1956): 149-55; N. Eishiskina, "Graham Greene's Novels," Voprosy Literaturny VI (1961): 149-69; and Valentina Ivasheva, "Legende und Wahrheit uber Graham Greene," Zeitschrift fur Anglistik und Amerikanistik X (1962): 229-58.

12. Henry J. Donaghy writes, "With The Quiet American, Greene left his explicitly religious novels behind and returned to the political novel" (Graham Greene 67); Grahame Smith speaks of "the internationalist phase we can see beginning with The Quiet American (131); John Spurling discusses "the series of post-war 'political' novels from The Quiet American to The Human Factor" (33); and Samuel Hynes declares that

Greene himself describes his work as being first political, then Catholic, and then political again, distinguishing early novels such as It's a Battlefield and later novels such as The Quiet American from the major religious works of his middle period, Brighton Rock, The Power and the Glory, and The Heart of the Matter.  
(3)

13. In its review of The Quiet American, Newsweek declared that

In 1952 [Greene] was temporarily denied a visa to the United States. In accordance with the McCarran Act, the United States consul in Saigon refused the visa because in his youth Greene had been a Communist for four weeks. . . . More poignantly, he may remember the libel suit which Shirley Temple, then age 9, brought against him for a review of "Wee Willie Winkie." . . . Delicacy forbids repeating the exact words of Greene's review, which suggested what a precociously appetizing tidbit the young star was. ("This Man's" 59)

Delicacy does not forbid me from repeating Greene's words; he wrote that Shirley Temple "had a certain adroit coquetry which appealed to middle-aged men" (qtd. in Kelly 11).

14. Not all critics have sought to defend Greene from these charges. John Atkins refers to "This anti-American element [that caused] a great splash of emotion and upset a lot of people" (232) without attempting to repudiate Greene's anti-Americanism. Instead, he argues that no "prejudice, even the rankest prejudice, necessarily spoils a novel. There is no reason," he writes, "why the author should not have a viewpoint, and even a crazy viewpoint does not damn a novel" (232). Similarly, Francis Kunkel suggests that even if we grant the premise (of critics like Robert Gorham Davis) "that this book is riddled with political heresy," such "unhealthy political notions . . . do not doom a novel." For Kunkel, "only apolitical shortcomings are enough to bury a failing novel" (150). So that their opinions will conform to the dominant beliefs within and receive the approbation of literary culture, Atkins and Kunkel grant the validity of the flak directed at Greene and argue that

such political concerns are irrelevant to their considerations of the literary merit of The Quiet American.

15. It is revealing to juxtapose Rai's discussion of Sartrean existentialism with Sartre's discussion of the Vietnam War. To Sartre, the war was

a new stage in the development of imperialism, a stage usually called neo-colonialism because it is characterized by aggression against a former colony which has already gained its independence, with the aim of subjugating it anew to colonial rule. With the beginning of independence, the neo-colonialists take care to finance a putsch or coup d'état so that the new heads of state do not represent the interests of the masses but those of a narrow privileged strata, and, consequently, of foreign capital. (538)

As for the U.S., Sartre argues, "the American government is guilty of having preferred . . . a policy of war and aggression aimed at total genocide to a policy of peace" (548):

16. Presumably, these grounds are just around the corner from Lionel Tilling's "dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet."

## CHAPTER 3

## THE GREENEING OF INDOCHINA

Who cared about the individuality of the man in the paddy field--and who does now? The only man to treat him as a man is the political commissar. He'll sit in his hut and ask his name and listen to his complaints; he'll give up an hour a day to teaching him--it doesn't matter what, he's being treated like a man, like someone of value.

--Graham Greene

The French are dying every day. . . . They aren't leading these people on with half-lies like your politicians--and ours. I've been in India, Pyle, and I know the harm liberals do. . . . I'd rather be an exploiter who fights for what he exploits and dies with it.

--Graham Greenel

The repeated attacks on The Quiet American were not evidence of Greene's radicalism so much as of the reactionary political climate of America in the 1950s. Cold war liberalism was critical of views like Greene's that were not wholly supportive of U.S. global policy and wholly condemning of communism. To see through the cloud of red-baiting stirred up by The Quiet American is to find a novel that, far from assaulting American verities, adheres to a belief in the benign motivation behind U.S. foreign policy. Instead of seeing the war as part of a larger struggle to further the interests of global capital, Greene blames American idealism and laments the passing of

French and British colonialism. Despite the red-baiting he was subjected to and despite his occasional sympathy for the Viet Minh, then, Greene in The Quiet American makes what amounts to a modest critique of U.S. policy, perpetuates a paternalistic attitude toward colonial subjects, and reinforces stereotypes common to colonial discourse.

### The Americans

While the main tendency of journalists and critics has been to dehistoricize and depoliticize The Quiet American, there has been since the war a counter (if marginal) tendency to see Greene's novel as an accurate, even prescient depiction of the lethal ignorance and naivete of U.S. policy.<sup>2</sup> Writing in London Magazine, Michael Menshaw declared The Quiet American "still the best novel about the war, and . . . appallingly prophetic" (105). In Rolling Stone Gloria Emerson claimed Greene "always understood what was going to happen there, and in that small and quiet novel, told us everything" (123). Richard Kelly asserted, The Quiet American "has acquired a new relevance since it first appeared in 1955. Alden Pyle . . . anticipates the painful folly of the American intervention in Vietnam some years later" (67). Gordon Taylor argued that The Quiet American "is as likely to be cited as 'evidence' by historians and reporters as to be lauded as exemplary

by literary critics" (294), while "Greene's delineation of the 1946 to 1954 French-Viet Minh conflict," to Thomas Myers, "is an eerie experience in regard to the replicating and enlarging of its key elements during the American involvement" (39). Beginning in the mid-1970s and continuing to the present, literary critics have considered the political and historical dimensions of The Quiet American, most often finding Greene's novel an insightful analysis of the motivation behind and the exercise of U.S. foreign policy.

Despite the frequency of these claims, though, little has been written that identifies exactly how Greene's depiction of U.S. behavior in Vietnam between 1952 and 1954 anticipates subsequent U.S. militarism in Vietnam. Probably the most complete discussion along these lines is Eric Larsen's 1976 essay in the New Republic. "Remarkable in its prescience," The Quiet American, for Larsen, "reads like an explicit prophecy of exactly what was to occur in the disastrous years following 1964" and "is still the best novel to have come out of the Vietnam War" (40-41, emphasis added). Larsen goes on to say that "Greene's analysis of the American motivation in that war is . . . rather unpleasantly accurate" (41). And he traces U.S. prosecution of a decade-long war against the Vietnamese communists to

our failure to perceive life generously for the untidy thing it really is. . . . Here we can see the specific failure of perception or emotion that Greene speaks of as "innocence": our characteristic failure to see or experience life as quite real. . . . What the satire is all about finally is our inability to think, politically or morally, or perhaps even to feel without recourse to abstraction. (41)

This American innocence, this inability to see life in its full complexity, is embodied by Alden Pyle and his belief in "democracy." According to Larsen, Greene describes through Pyle "that part of us that chooses not to think but to substitute a few abstract and therefore rigid assumptions for the process of real thought" (42).<sup>3</sup>

In assessing The Quiet American, Larsen is correct; this American innocence, this tendency to think abstractly about "democracy" and to ignore the complicated and contradictory real world is a central part of Greene's critique. Pyle is a representative innocent American who is, Greene writes, "absorbed in the dilemmas of democracy and the responsibilities of the West" (11). He is an idealist whose face often registers a "look of pain and disappointment . . . when reality didn't match the romantic ideas he cherished, or when someone he loved or admired dropped below the impossible standard he had set" (66-67). At times Pyle is a Jimmy Stewart-like rube who admits he "never had a girl . . . not properly. Not what you'd call a real experience" (94), and who gazes "at a milk bar across the street and sa[ys] dreamily, 'That looks like a good soda-

fountain'" (16). He is respectful, well-mannered, and "very meticulous about small courtesies" (3), and he objects to profane comments about Vietnamese prostitutes, "complaining that anything good--and prettiness and grace are surely forms of goodness--should be marred or ill-treated" (31). His very appearance shows him to be innocent: his "unmistakably young and unused face," Fowler says, "flung at us like a dart. With his gangly legs and his crew cut and his wide campus gaze he seemed incapable of harm" (10). With his New England background--"only ten days ago he had been walking back across the Common in Boston"--(10) and the allusion to John Alden (who had innocently wooed Priscilla from Miles Standish, much as Pyle woos Phuong from Fowler), Alden Pyle is clearly meant as a representative innocent and idealistic American.

In Pyle Greene continues the theme of American innocence (and European experience) that was an especial concern for Henry James. Greene long maintained his admiration for and indebtedness to James's fiction, claiming The Wings of a Dove was among his favorite novels (Jove 23) and declaring that "the pure novel . . . reach[ed] its magnificent tortuous climax in England in the works of Henry James" (qtd. in Shuttleworth 34). Although wrong for ignoring the historical context and political content of The Quiet American, critics like Roger Sharrock were to



some degree correct in noting that

underneath the documentary and the political comment the conflict between innocence and experience is the true theme, played out . . . in a real historical situation in a real world. (216)

Greene updates this theme, showing that on the world stage such innocence can be lethal. As Frances Kunkel explains, "Where James sees this innocence as a redemptive quality that will save the Old World, Greene sees it as positively ruinous in the world of today" (151). When thinking back on Pyle, Fowler exhorts God to "save us always . . . from the innocent and the good" (12).

Greene is unsparing in his depiction of Pyle's devotion to cant and obliviousness to the real-world consequences of his actions. After walking through the remains of an explosion he has arranged, Pyle sees blood on his shoes and declares he "must get a shine," to which Fowler comments, "I don't think he knew what he was saying. He was seeing a real war for the first time." Fowler forces Pyle to see the grim results of his actions, "push[ing] him into a patch of blood where a stretcher had lain" (157).

But Fowler's efforts are to no avail, as he soon recognizes, asking, "What's the good? he'll always be innocent, you can't blame the innocent, they are always guiltless. All you can do is control them or eliminate them."

Innocence is a kind of insanity" (157). Pyle, Fowler tells us, "was impregnably armoured by his good intentions and his ignorance" (158); he knows little of the political situation in Indochina, depending entirely upon the conceits of academic foreign policy expert York Harding. (Harding, who had been in Vietnam "once for a week on his way from Bangkok to Tokyo" [162], is the author of The Advance of Red China, The Challenge to Democracy, and The Role of the West.) In commentary meant to identify Pyle as an embodiment of American policy, Fowler says,

I know your motives are good; they always are. . . .  
I wish sometimes you had a few bad motives; you  
might understand a little more about human beings.  
And that applies to your country, too. (126)

For Greene, Pyle's flaws--a lack of worldly experience, a failure to recognize his own destructiveness, an excessive idealism, and a reliance upon abstractions--are America's flaws.

It is precisely this use of Pyle that distorts Greene's analysis. For while the American innocent may have a long-standing place within literary tradition, it is another thing entirely to turn to a nineteenth century literary conceit and national myth to explain mid-twentieth century U.S. foreign policy. After all, the core innocence Greene attributes to Pyle is little apparent in U.S. foreign policy during the cold war--and even less ap-

parent in U.S. actions in Vietnam. As a figure meant to embody the aims and beliefs of U.S. policy--Pyle is decidedly unrepresentative.

To demonstrate how Greene's use of Pyle misrepresents the grounds upon which American foreign policy is formulated and implemented, we must answer this question: to what extent has this policy been motivated by, in Time's words, "the phenomenon of U.S. good will"? Or to put it another way, is U.S. policy significantly inspired by concerns other than economic self-interest and national advantage? In The Tragedy of American Diplomacy William Appleman Williams identifies three conceptions that guide American policy:

One is the warm, generous, humanitarian impulse to help other people solve their problems. A second is the principle of self-determination applied at the international level, which asserts the right of every society to establish its own goals or objectives, and to realize them internally through the means it decides are appropriate. . . . But the third idea . . . is one which insists that other people cannot really solve their problems and improve their lives unless they go about it in the same way as the United States. (9)

Williams argues that this third idea overwhelms whatever warm impulses and concerns for self-determination are held by U.S. policy elites. "This insistence that other people ought to copy America," he writes, "contradicts the humanitarian urge to help them and the idea that they have

the right to make such key decisions for themselves" (10).

I would argue that the first two of Williams's points function rhetorically, not practically; warm impulses and the principle of self-determination do not determine policy. I take issue with Williams's third point as well, since it suggests that, however ultimately frustrated, the U.S. is motivated by compassion and benevolence.

I do not deny that policy-makers may frequently believe their own mythology--such deception, after all, is a central purpose of ideology. Nonetheless, in attempting to understand the nature of U.S. foreign policy it is more important (and ultimately more explanatory) to view the results of this policy than to construct motivations for the people who shape it. As Richard Miller observes,

We resolve the question of interests and principles with [major political figures] as with anyone else, by looking at what they actually do, and at the information and background of their choices. (164)

It is difficult to find a shaping humanitarian impulse behind the results of U.S. foreign policy. On the other hand, if one can get past the fog of ideology, it is easy to recognize how ruling class interests shape this policy. Williams's notion that American diplomacy is a tragedy, that American policy-makers are well-intentioned but self-deceived Lears, foolishly making decisions that contradict their best impulses, puts far too noble a gloss on a poli-

cy that has consistently thwarted anti-capitalist social movements and supported authoritarian pro-capitalist regimes. American foreign policy has been guided by economic self-interest, and its long, bitter campaign against communism has been waged to maintain and expand global capital. The American crusade against communism was motivated by the need to thwart, in the words of Noam Chomsky,

the effort of indigenous movements to extricate their societies from the integrated world system dominated largely by American capital, and to use their resources for their own social and economic development. (At War 5)

Of course, some find a vital link between capitalism and social justice and thus maintain that there is no discrepancy between humanitarian impulses and global capital. Harry Magdoff summarizes this argument:

Political freedom is equated with Western-style democracy. The economic basis of this democracy is free enterprise. Hence the political aim of defense of the free world must also involve the defense of free trade and free enterprise. (Age of Imperialism 175)

Or as President Clinton's National Security Adviser Anthony Lake explained, having "Throughout the cold war . . . contained a global threat to market democracies," the U.S. can now seek "enlargement--enlargement of the world's

free community of market democracies" (qtd. in Chomsky, "Clinton Vision" 28). The consequences of this defense and enlargement of capitalism, however, have been far from humanitarian. There has instead been a widening gap between rich and poor, as well as an increase in unemployment, ecological ruin, malnutrition, and disease.<sup>4</sup>

Greene's reliance upon the innocent American mythos, then, perpetuates a useful falsehood about the motivation of U.S. policy elites. In The Quiet American Greene sees U.S. foreign policy as driven by an ignorance born out of innocence. Although he shows the brutal results of American policy, demonstrating that U.S. actions are no different from any other nation's, Greene does not challenge and in fact reinforces the notion that American policy-makers see their actions as benign and believe in their own good will. In his response to Diana Trilling in Commentary, Philip Rahv identifies the ideological usefulness of Greene's view of American innocence:

Mrs. Trilling appraises this anti-Americanism as Communist in essence. But is it? Its principal content, apart from some pointed witticisms, is the charge of "innocence," which it is said mankind cannot afford to indulge Americans in at this hour of universal peril. Now obviously this is a charge that Communism does not consider in the least useful; it has never formed a part of its indictment of America. What the Communists do accuse Americans of is "war-mongering" and conspiring to dominate the world for imperialist gain. Imperialists and "Wall Street profiteers" are scarcely noted for their "innocence," a quality implying good will and good intentions.  
(69)

U.S. policy toward the Vietnamese communists, Greene suggests (and U.S. action during the Vietnam War, Larsen and others suggest), is due to the American national character, to its excessive innocence and idealism, to the naive determination of people like Pyle "to do good, not to any individual person, but to a country, a continent, a world" (QA 11). No matter how fundamentally ignorant and misguided were U.S. actions, the motivation behind such actions, on this account, was benign.

Repeatedly, the pundits, politicians, bureaucrats, journalists, and scholars who comprise the American foreign-policy establishment, even while admitting the awful consequences of its policy, have reinforced notions of American exceptionalism. For Hans Morgenthau, "Only the enemies of the United States will question the generosity of [American efforts to build a nation in South Vietnam] which have no parallel in history" (qtd. in Chomsky, American Power 32). Acknowledging that the U.S. "did indeed rip South Vietnam's social fabric to shreds" and agreeing that Vietnamese communists' criticism of American imperialism "was not entirely wrong," Stanley Karnow argued that the U.S. was "motivated by the loftiest of intentions" (439). For Arthur Schlesinger, U.S. policies in Vietnam circa 1954 were "part of our general program of international goodwill" (qtd. in American Power 329), and for George Kennan, throughout its diplomatic history but par-

ticularly in Asia, the U.S. has attempted "to achieve our foreign policy objectives by inducing other governments to sign up to professions of high moral and legal principle" (46). We have, Kennan argues, made "ourselves slaves of the concepts of international law and morality" (54). Writing only a few years before the U.S. would overthrow democratically elected governments in Iran and Guatemala and would subvert the Geneva Accords in Vietnam, Kennan identified America's "legalistic-moralistic approach to international problems" (95) as the most serious flaw in U.S. policy formulation, a flaw he argued had severely handicapped U.S. global aims. Likewise, Herman Kahn lamented that "people in this country are not used to doing dirty tricks and playing rough. It doesn't come naturally to most of us" (qtd. in Windmiller 118).<sup>5</sup> This belief in American beneficence is not a cold war relic. Anthony Lake, writing two years after the Persian Gulf War, asserted that, unlike other nations, the U.S. does "not seek to expand the reach of our institutions by force" (qtd. in Chomsky, "Clinton Vision" 28), while in 1994 in the New York Times Magazine and Vanity Fair respectively, David Fromkin argued that "American motives are now largely humanitarian" and former Vietnam War correspondent David Halberstam wrote of "the American instinct for goodness and morality in foreign policy" (250).<sup>6</sup>



The Quiet American is meant to demonstrate the absurdity and venality of such views. But in so doing Greene does not question the basic premise underlying this position; he shows Pyle to be a cynical exploiter, not a naive believer in the myth of American exceptionalism. For Greene, "Pyle was an innocent and an idealist" (Yours 127). The problem here is that to see American policy as idealist is to assert its humanitarian inspiration; to see it as innocent is to suggest that policy-makers are unaware of the consequences of their actions, consequences Greene shows are the consistent results of U.S. policy. Thus whereas many earlier critics thought Pyle's exaggerated character stemmed from Greene's anti-Americanism, I find the opposite to be true--Pyle's unbelievability stems from Greene's acceptance of American exceptionalism. Greene's view of American foreign policy--out of which Pyle has been constructed and which he is meant to represent--is itself unbelievable. Those of Pyle's characteristics (virginity, chivalry, courage, enthusiasm, naivete) that are the most unbelievable and that most obviously violate the otherwise realistic, almost journalistic tenor of this novel are those qualities meant to signify American innocence and idealism.

Although critical of its policy in Vietnam, Greene in The Quiet American does not question, and in fact reinforces a belief in American exceptionalism, a belief that

underlies the dominant view of U.S. foreign policy. That Greene was repeatedly attacked for being anti-American is evidence of the especially constrained discourse of cold war liberalism. That literary critics, even while defending Greene's analysis and critique of U.S. policy, have not questioned the novel's affirmation of U.S. humanitarianism suggests a broad sympathy between the world-views of American literary culture and the political establishment.<sup>7</sup>

Missing from The Quiet American and from its critical evaluations has been a recognition that U.S. policy is part of a systematic effort to thwart egalitarian social movements that threaten American commercial interests and frustrate American geopolitical aims, an effort "to secure the international position of the U.S. and the interests of the capitalist class" (Joseph 16). Although Greene is well aware that in Vietnam the U.S. was motivated by geopolitical and economic concerns, his reliance upon the innocent American lessens U.S. blame and diminishes the view that, in Chomsky's words,

the Vietnam war is simply a catastrophic episode, a grim and costly failure in [the] long-term effort to reduce Eastern Asia and much of the rest of the world to part of the American-dominated economic system (At War 9).

### The Europeans

His understanding of the motivation behind U.S. policy notwithstanding, Greene's depiction of the French-Indochinese War generally accords with the historical record. A careful reader may even discover, in the composition of troops fighting to keep Indochina under French control, something of the dislocations caused by and the global exploitation inherent in capitalist imperialism. Among the "French" soldiers encountered by Fowler are a Senegalese sentry (38), Moroccan and Senegalese platoons (75), and a corporal "making a joke in German" (30). Also, the troops who accompany Fowler at the canal massacre are German: Fowler "heard somebody . . . say with great seriousness, 'Gott sei dank.' Except for the lieutenant they were most of them Germans" (45). These are Foreign Legionnaires who Greene describes elsewhere in The Quiet American as standing "guard in their white kepis and their scarlet epaulettes" (18). These details, however, are neither emphasized nor explained. Greene uses this information neither to criticize the French nor to identify the complex mix of geopolitics and capitalist expansion against which this war takes place. Instead, these details make up the historical background out of which he writes. H. Bruce Franklin spells out some of the history Greene omits:

the great majority of those fighting under French command were not French but Vietnamese conscripts, Foreign Legionnaires (many of whom were Germans, including tens of thousands of Nazi soldiers captured at the end of World War II), and troops from the French colonies in Africa, especially Algeria, Morocco, and Senegal, forced to fight against an anti-colonialist insurgency with which many were beginning to identify. . . . General Dwight D. Eisenhower in April 1945 explicitly stripped all captured German soldiers of their rights as prisoners of war by consigning them to a new classification he called "Disarmed Enemy Forces" (DEF). Of the DEF under U.S. jurisdiction, 140,000 were transferred to the Soviet Union, which repatriated the last survivors in 1956; 400,000 were shipped to Great Britain, which used them as slave laborers until July 1948; and 740,000 were given to France, where many of them starved to death. It has been argued that this starvation was a deliberate policy designed to force the prisoners to choose the only available escape: enlistment in the French Foreign Legion, whose ranks were being swelled so that France could reoccupy its colonies in Indochina. So tens of thousands of German POWs, actually U.S. prisoners illegally handed over to France, ended up as one of the main forces fighting from 1946 to 1954 to destroy the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and reduce Vietnam once again to colonial status. (25-27)8

The recruitment of troops from their colonies was not a new policy for the French, who had employed colonial troops during the first world war. Ho Chi Minh asserted that from its far-flung empire, "700,000 natives came to France, and of this number 80,000 [would] never see the sun of their country" (73). According to Thomas Hodgkin, 50,000 Vietnamese troops and 50,000 workers were sent to Europe during World War I (211). The global reach of French colonialism sometimes resulted in a surprising (though hardly liberatory) boundary-transgressing multi-

culturalism, as in Nguyen Dac Bang's remembrance of being guarded by "a platoon of red-capped Senagelese soldiers" while a political prisoner in French Guinea (qtd. in Luong 119).

It is worth noting that, despite their national pursuits for economic advantage in East Asia, France and Britain were united in their opposition to communism. In June 1931, for instance, during a French campaign against the Indochinese Communist Party, Ho Chi Minh escaped to Hong Kong, where he was, in Marilyn Young's words, "cooperatively arrested" by the British (5). In September 1945, after Ho Chi Minh had declared Vietnamese independence, the British (who were in charge of the Japanese surrender south of the 16th parallel) with Indian Gurkha troops fought the Viet Minh in Saigon. As Young explains, "Not only did one colonial power come to the aid of another in need, but it drew on the resources of its colonies to do so" (12). Also, Britain, like France, employed former axis troops, rearming both Vichy French and Japanese soldiers to help expel the Viet Minh from Saigon. Whether or not this use of Japanese troops to reinstall French colonial rule was the explicit aim of the British (Stanley Karnow suggests this policy resulted from decisions made by British General Douglas Gracey in Saigon and not by officials in the British government), the result--expulsion of communists and maintenance of colonial rule--was in keeping with the capitalist powers' primary goals.<sup>9</sup>

At times in The Quiet American Greene suggests similarities between the French war and British and American imperialism. A battle between French and Vietnamese troops is described as "fixed like a panorama of the Boer War in an old Illustrated London News" (38). Greene tells us that among Pyle's books is "a history of the war in the Philippines" (21). And in response to the suggestion that America came into Vietnam "with clean hands," Fowler responds, "Hawaii, Puerto Rico . . . New Mexico" (117). But Greene's intent here is not to demonstrate the continuity of capitalist exploitation of the third world. Instead, he seeks to defend French colonialism by delegitimizing American exceptionalism, an exceptionalism that has traditionally been thought of, in Amy Kaplan's words, as "inherently anti-imperialist, in opposition to the empire-building of either the Old World or of communism and fascism, which collapse together into totalitarianism" (12). Greene attempts to show that the U.S. is not anti-imperialist, as the exceptionalist myth asserts, but that, like France, its policy is determined by economic and geopolitical interests. Ironically, as I discussed above, even as he attempts to deny American exceptionalism in practice, Greene reinforces the notion that, however wrong-headed, it serves as a guiding principle for U.S. policy elites.

Greene consistently sympathizes with the French, particularly when compared with Americans. Fowler derides

his "American colleagues of the press, big, noisy, boyish and middle-aged, full of sour cracks against the French, who were, when all was said, fighting this war" (15). Similarly, Fowler declares, "it was their war, not ours. We had no God-given right to information. We didn't have to fight left-wing deputies in Paris as well as the troops of Ho-Chi-Minh . . . We were not dying" (57). But perhaps the clearest example of Greene's sympathy for the French is voiced by the heroic Captain Trouin, a pilot Fowler accompanies on a bombing mission. Trouin declares he detests "napalm bombing. From three thousand feet, in safety." And

he said with anger against a whole world that didn't understand, "I'm not fighting a colonial war. Do you think I'd do these things for the planters of Terre Rouge? I'd rather be court-martialled. We are fighting all of your wars, but you leave us the guilt." (145)

Trouin is partly correct: the French were fighting for the interests of capitalist nations, as is evident in the amount of economic and material support provided them by the U.S., and as was graphically demonstrated by the subsequent American war against the Vietnamese. Trouin goes on to say,

I think that I am defending Europe. And you know, those others--they do some monstrous things also. When they were driven out of Hanoi in 1946 they left terrible relics among their own people--people they thought had helped us. (146)

Trouin's notion that he is defending Europe accords with the view that Vietnamese communism is a local manifestation of global communism. His justifying the French war because the Vietnamese committed atrocities, a justification Greene seems to affirm, ignores obvious differences between the French and Vietnamese struggles--the French fought to continue their exploitation of Indochina, the Vietnamese to achieve self-determination and to escape the onerous conditions resulting from colonial exploitation. Trouin also fails to consider the racist aspects of French colonialism. This racism was identified years earlier by Phan Chu Trinh in a letter to French Governor-General Paul Beau:

Note how everywhere, in your newspapers, in your books, in your intimate conversations, is expressed in all its intensity the deep contempt which you feel towards us. In your eyes we are simply "savages," "pigs," "creatures incapable of distinguishing between good and evil," whom you don't merely refuse to treat as equals, but whose physical presence you fear as a kind of contamination. (qtd. in Hodgkin 186)

Such racism, of course, was not an essential component of French or Western thought, as Nhat-Linh makes clear in his account of a journey from Vietnam to France:

The farther the ship got from Vietnam and the closer it got to France, to the same degree the more decently the people aboard the ship treated me. In the China Sea they did not care to look at me. By the Gulf of Siam they were looking at me with scornful



apprehension, the way they would look at a mosquito carrying malaria germs to Europe. When we entered the Indian Ocean, their eyes began to become infected with expressions of gentleness and compassion . . . and when we crossed the Mediterranean, suddenly they viewed me as being civilized like themselves, and began to entertain ideas of respecting me. At that time I was very elated. But I still worried about the time when I was going to return home! (qtd. in Luong 225)

French racism toward the Vietnamese was more common in Vietnam than in France because in Vietnam it served a specific function--to justify and excuse the systematic exploitation of colonial rule. Thinking of the Vietnamese as less than human, the French could more easily maintain an exploitative colonial system and could reconcile belief in the nobility of their culture and its civilizing mission with their often inhumane treatment of the Vietnamese.

Trouin overlooks the historic abuses of this system, saying nothing about the long history of French colonial rule and its repression of Vietnamese communists. Reciting one instance of this repression, Huynh Kim Khanh tells of how in 1940 the French arrested more than 5,000 people and packed them "into dry-docked ships floating in the Saigon River. For want of chains and handcuffs, wires piercing the hands and heels of prisoners were used to hold them in place" (qtd in Young 5). Trouin also ignores the more immediate historical context that led to the Viet Minh's being driven out of Hanoi in December 1946. One

month earlier the French, in violation of a cease-fire agreement, had demanded the evacuation of Viet Minh troops from Haiphong and had given them two hours to do so.

Karnow recounts the actions taken by the French:

French infantry and armored units went through the city, fighting house to house against Vietminh squads. French aircraft zoomed in to bomb and strafe while the cruiser Suffren, in the harbor, lobbed shells into the city, demolishing whole neighborhoods of flimsy structures. Refugees streamed into nearby provinces with their belongings in baskets and on bicycles, and the naval guns shelled them as well.  
(156)

Vietnamese deaths from this action have been estimated at between 500 and 20,000. In recounting Trouin's story of Viet Minh atrocities, Greene provides no critical comment, nor does he refer to this or other relevant background information or to the systemic abuses that occurred during France's 70 year occupation of Vietnam; he gives a platform for the heroic and eloquent Trouin, but gives no similar space for the Vietnamese communist position.

At times there is an almost elegiac quality to Greene's depiction of the French-Indochinese war, as in Fowler's recounting of what occurs after the strafing of a sampan:

I put on my earphones for Captain Trouin to speak to me. He said, "We will make a little detour. the sunset is wonderful on the calcaire. You must not miss it," he added kindly, like a host who is

showing the beauty of his estate, and for a hundred miles we trailed the sunset over the Baie d'Along. The helmeted Martian face looked wistfully out, down the golden groves, among the great humps and arches of porous stone, and the wound of murder ceased to bleed. (144-45)

While maintaining a certain irony here in his description of Trouin's Martian face scanning the beautiful Vietnamese landscape, Greene does not mock Trouin. Rather, he seems sympathetic to Trouin's pain and nostalgia, to this Frenchman's wistful appreciation of his nation's declining colonial estate, to this imperial sunset.

The most prominent representative of the colonial powers in The Quiet American, though, is the narrator, Englishman Thomas Fowler. Much of the initial attack directed at this novel centered around Fowler's criticism of America. Greene defended himself from charges of anti-Americanism by asserting that reviewers like Robert Gorham Davis mistakenly read Fowler's opinion as his own; on the contrary, Greene argued, Fowler too was a satirical target. There are reasons, however, to believe that Pyle and Fowler are not comparable targets and that to some extent Fowler serves as a spokesman for Greene. For one thing, Pyle is a caricature, whereas Fowler is a fully rounded character, is capable of introspection, of self-doubt and self-criticism. Unlike the rigid ideologue Pyle, Fowler can learn and change. In a novel with no other normative character, and in Fowler faced with a character whose

politics and moral crisis are consonant with the heroes in many of Greene's other novels, a character who like Greene is an English journalist writing about Indochina, a character who is genuinely affected by the suffering wrought by Pyle and who agonizes over what if any action he should take to thwart further suffering, the reader inevitably will find sympathy between Fowler's beliefs and Greene's.

The central dilemma in The Quiet American is Fowler's choice between disengagement and action. This dilemma is presented most overtly in a discussion between Pyle and Fowler when, accompanied by two Vietnamese guards, they seek shelter from the Viet Minh. Fowler voices his compassion for suffering humanity and his dismissal of political philosophies:

"Isms and ocracies. Give me facts. A rubber planter beats his labourer--all right, I'm against him. He hasn't been instructed to do it by the Minister of the Colonies. In France I expect he'd beat his wife. I've seen a priest so poor he hasn't a change of trousers, working fifteen hours a day from hut to hut in a cholera epidemic, eating nothing but rice and salt fish, saying his Mass with an old cup--a wooden platter. I don't believe in God and yet I'm for that priest. Why don't you call that colonialism?" (87-88)

By demanding facts (such as the beating of a laborer by a rubber planter), Fowler seems to want to cut through ideological mystifications to discover the genuine suffering

of real individuals. In effect, however, Fowler is decontextualizing such suffering, severing it from the system that produced it. Fowler's argument against colonialism's systemic mistreatment of workers is to say that the rubber planter was not commanded to beat his workers by the Minister of Colonies. This collapsing of system into conspiracy is a familiar response to ideological critique. Based on Fowler's repudiation of this critique (what he derides as "isms and ocracies") and his praise for the French priest, one could conclude that there is nothing inherently wrong with colonialism--a colonial power, according to Fowler's understanding, does not systemically exploit and terrorize its subjects. Instead, the good and the bad of colonialism are produced by the vagaries of individual wills.

Needless to say, the suffering produced by French colonial rule in Indochina was widespread and systemically reproduced. Hy V. Luong identifies the systemic economic exploitation intitiated by the French:

Parallel to the consolidation of political control was the development of a colonial economic policy that created conditions favorable to the capitalist exploitation of land, labor, and other natural resources, and that compounded the problems faced by peasants in maintaining their livelihoods. Specific colonial measures in Indochina included the introduction of direct and indirect taxation and the conversion of tax payments from kind to cash in order to facilitate capitalist growth, the concession of indigenous land to colonial settlers for the development of major cash crops, the appropriation of labor

through a corvee system, and the introduction of repressive labor laws to hold down labor costs for capitalist agromineral ventures. (43)

In sum, according to Gabriel Kolko, "French investment procedures and practices in Vietnam were unquestionably among the most violent and exploitative known to the twentieth century" (16). Among many specific instances of this violence and exploitation, Kolko refers to the construction of a railway link between Hanoi and the Chinese border which saw 30 percent of its 80,000 laborers die on the job (16). According to company records, between 1917-1944 there were 12,000 deaths out of 45,000 workers at one Michelin company rubber plantation, 10,000 out of 37,000 at two plantations belonging to the Cexo Company, and 22,000 out of 198,000 at plantations owned by the Terre Rouge Company--the company Trouin denies defending (Hodgkin 182). Karnow claims that in Vietnam rubber "was produced by virtually indentured workers . . . blighted by malaria, dysentery, and malnutrition" (118). "For the Vietnamese," asserts the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, "increasing misery was the lot of all but the few who collaborated with the French. The real standard of living fell" (7).<sup>10</sup> As Governor-General of Indochina (and later President of France) Paul Doumer stated, "When France arrived in Indochina, the Annamites were ripe for servitude" (qtd. in Karnow 116).<sup>11</sup>

Fowler is not oblivious to the suffering of the Vietnamese. He recognizes and is sympathetic to the appeal of the Viet Minh, asserting that "the only man to treat [the peasant] as a man is the political commissar. He'll sit in his hut and ask his name and listen to his complaints; he'll give up an hour a day to teaching him" (89). In arguing against Pyle's democratic cant, Fowler states his own views about the needs and beliefs of the Vietnamese:

"They don't believe in anything either. You and your like are trying to make a war with the help of people who just aren't interested."

"They don't want communism."

"They want enough rice," [Fowler] said. "They don't want to be shot at. They want one day to be much the same as another. They don't want our white skins around telling them what they want." (86)

While Fowler may understand the desperate conditions of the peasantry and may be correct about their basic needs, his sympathy with French colonialism and his political disengagement make it impossible for him to offer any way to alter this situation in order to help the Vietnamese. As Terry Eagleton argues,

Fowler's political position is . . . deeply confused. The question of how peace and enough rice are to be attained--the fact that it is, inescapably, a political question, and that it slides over certain additional issues, such as whether the peasants are to govern themselves or be governed by imperialist regimes--is seriously blurred. (126)

In The Quiet American, rather than making an ambiguous critique of French colonialism and American imperialism, and rather than identifying some basis by which the exploitation of the Vietnamese may be lessened, Greene establishes a dynamic between Pyle's simplistic (and murderous) ideology and Fowler's disengagement in order to test the question of political commitment and individual responsibility.

The central actor in this scenario is Fowler. At first he is cynical and disengaged, telling us that once he "was interested in what for want of a better term they call news. But grenades had staled on me; they were something listed on the back page of the local paper" (10), and claiming, "I would not be involved. . . . I took no action--even an opinion is a kind of action" (20). Greene does not endorse Fowler's despair, cynicism, and inaction, and so contrives a situation (Pyle's involvement in mass murder) in which Fowler must act. Confused and indecisive, Fowler addresses his concerns to a Viet Minh operative, Mr. Heng: "What'll he do next, Heng? How many bombs and dead children can you get out of a drum of Diolacton?" (167). In a sentence that speaks to America's actions (and is the kind of statement critics see as forecasting America's history in Vietnam) Fowler declares, "He comes blundering in, and people have to die for his mistakes" (168). To Fowler's confusion Heng responds with



what perhaps is the key to the novel: "one has to take sides--if one is to remain human" (168). The vital question in The Quiet American is whether Heng is correct, whether in a world of suffering our humanity is determined by our commitment, by our choosing sides and taking action.

Greene gives no certain answer to this dilemma. He recognizes the inadequacy of Fowler's disengagement but suggests that his action--to stop further killing by having Pyle killed--is no solution either. For one thing, Fowler regrets his action and demonstrates sympathy for Pyle, wishing "there existed someone to whom [he] could say that [he] was sorry" (183). For another, Fowler's motivation is ambiguous; there is reason to believe he kills Pyle to reclaim Phuong. Eagleton summarizes Greene's final position:

Detachment is desirable, but only to the degree that it does not sterilise the humane feelings by which criticism of others' more committed (and so more destructive) involvements can be made. The uncommitted man must be shown as both inhumanly cynical and humanly sensitive; either perspective can be selected to attack the revolutionary, but both are necessary if the attack is to rest on a version of man both inferior and superior to the revolutionary's own. (128)

Greene establishes a binary (disengagement/activism) in order to problematize both positions, suggesting an alternate, moderate path, a concerned and critical humanitari-

anism that is neither detached from the world nor committed to an ideology. In Fowler Greene constructs an experienced and complex European, a regretful colonialist who contrasts favorably with the childish and lethally innocent ideologue, Pyle. Greene ultimately supports an individualist politics based on integrity and complexity of character, a politics that to the Vietnamese can offer only concern and regret and recognition of the inadequacy of ideological solutions. Although writing generally about colonial discourse, Abdul R. JanMohammed summarizes the logic at work in The Quiet American:

since the colonialist wants to maintain his privileges by preserving the status quo, his representation of the world contains neither a sense of historical becoming, nor a concrete vision of a future different from the present, nor a teleology other than the infinitely postponed process of "civilizing." (88)

### The Orientals

In colonial discourse the colonized world has often been depicted as female. In the Rhetoric of Empire, David Spurr cites a turn-of-the-century French writer for whom Laos is "swooning like a lascivious lover, between the arms of her river and her stream, drunk with pleasure . . . at the flanks of her burning mountains." Spurr also cites a reporter for the Chicago Tribune who in 1983 depicted Saigon as "an aging dowager mistress, pining for

her lost youth, yet still capable of firing the imagination with gestures that hint at the elegant temptress she once was" (171-73). A similar gendering (and eroticizing) of the colonial world appears in The Quiet American, where the contested mistress Phuong suggests Vietnam torn between lovers, the colonial powers (Fowler) and the postwar neocolonial U.S. (Pyle).<sup>12</sup>

This analogizing of the female and the third world was due to a perceived similarity between the binaries men/women and colonizer/colonized: just as women were inferior to men, so the colonies were inferior to the colonial powers. This inferiority was both physical (women/colonial subjects were weaker) and intellectual (women/colonial subjects were irrational). Additionally, just as women were unknown and mysterious, so the colonized world was alien and exotic. Both women and colonial subjects were thought natural, in close communion with the earth. In combination, these features--submissiveness, irrationality, exoticism, and naturalness--suggest the unique sensuality of native women. The East in particular has been associated with sex. As Edward Said observes, "the Orient seems still to suggest not only fecundity but sexual promise (and threat), untiring sensuality, unlimited desire, deep generative energies" (188).

A similar rhetoric is apparent in The Quiet American, where Vietnamese women have little identity outside of

their physical appearance and sexual performance. Greene describes the "lovely flat figures [in] white silk trousers, the long tight jackets in pink and mauve patterns, slit up the thigh" (10). And Fowler declares that "To take an Annamite to bed with you is like taking a bird: they twitter and sing on your pillow" (5). One might expect that in their feminist/postcolonialist reading of The Quiet American Zakia Pathak, Saswati Sengupta and Sharmila Purkayastha would criticize Greene for this sexist and racist portrayal. After all, they properly rebuke the literary establishment's response for its

liberal humanist programme of purifying the story from historical dross, reducing Vietnam to a microcosm of the modern world and collapsing the politics into categories of Christian discourse. (202)

Likewise, they assert they will "read the collusion of two discourses, imperialist and patriarchal, as constituting [Phuong] and structuring the text" (202). It comes as a surprise then that Pathak, et al. do not link Fowler's views with Greene's. Instead they repeat the notion, common to the critical reception of The Quiet American, that Fowler is to be read ironically. As "the target of . . . authorial irony" Fowler becomes a

masculinist who for all his sympathy with Phuong, his desire to protect her from the crudities inflicted on her by white men, his frustration at her silence, ul-

timately settles for her body on which he inscribes the sign of his possession. On the political plain, [Fowler becomes] the twentieth-century Orientalist; sympathetic but outsider; confronting the East as object to be understood in an essentially hermeneutical relation. (204)

Rather than repeating familiar colonial tropes about Oriental women, Greene is seen as critiquing Orientalist assumptions through his ironic depiction of Fowler. As I have already discussed, though, this ironic reading is not quite so clear-cut. For while criticizing Fowler, Greene also sympathizes with him. It becomes difficult, therefore, to know the extent to which Greene repudiates or endorses Fowler's beliefs. Unless he is to be read entirely ironically (his concern for proper moral action and his complexly drawn character would seem to preclude such a reading), we cannot with any certainty separate Fowler's beliefs from Greene's.<sup>13</sup>

Nowhere are Fowler's/Greene's attitudes toward Vietnamese women clearer than in the depiction of Phuong. She first appears in the novel not as an individual but as an anonymous Vietnamese beauty. Fowler says, "I couldn't see her face, only the white silk trousers and the long flowered robe, but I knew her for all that" (3).<sup>14</sup> This is a fitting introduction, since Phuong remains faceless (and voiceless) throughout the novel. If Pyle is quiet, Phuong is virtually mute. At times even her physical presence seems insubstantial. Fowler says, "One always spoke of

her . . . in the third person, as though she were not there. Sometimes she seemed invisible" (37). Phuong's insubstantiality, in particular her silence, is characteristic of colonial (and patriarchal) discourse about indigenous peoples (and women).

When not silenced or erased, Phuong is depicted as a natural object. Sleeping with her is like "taking a bird"; her name means Phoenix. (This bird imagery is consistent with Fowler's name: he will grant her some freedom but will not let her fly away--and when she breaks free to go with Pyle, he will ensure she returns). She lay upon Fowler's bed "like a dog on a crusader's tomb" ( ). She is "indigenous like an herb" (7), is "like a flower" (94), is "so young a plant" (108). "Her colour," Greene writes, "was that of the small flame" (7). Bird, Phoenix, dog, herb, flower, plant, flame--Phuong is many things but never a fully rounded human being.

What individuality Phuong does achieve is as Fowler's servant and mistress. Except for when she leaves him for Pyle, Phuong regularly takes Fowler's commands and does his bidding. Fowler declares, "she always told me what I wanted to hear, like a coolie answering questions" (108), and "She did at once what I asked. . . . Just so she would have made love if I had asked her to, straight away, peeling off her trousers without question" (109). Fowler describes Phuong's function: "she cooked for me, she made

my pipes, she gently and sweetly laid out her body for my pleasure" (134). Even when his description turns figurative, Fowler identifies Phuong by the services she performs, erasing her humanity and transforming her into useful object: "she was . . . the hiss of steam, the clink of a cup; she was a certain hour of the night and the promise of rest" (4).

Other than to be his sexual partner, Phuong's main function is to prepare Fowler's opium pipes. She is, in fact, consistently associated with and at times likened to opium. Fowler says,

When I opened my eyes she had lit the lamp and the tray was already prepared. The lamplight made her skin the colour of dark amber as she bent over the flame with a frown of concentration, heating the small paste of opium. . . . I thought that if I smelled her skin it would have the faintest fragrance of opium, and her colour was that of the small flame. (5-7)

For Fowler, Phuong is like opium--she seduces him with an easy comfort and removes him from his daily cares. Fowler is almost addicted to her. His only comfort when she leaves him is to turn to that which she resembles--opium. This dependence upon Phuong/opium suggests Fowler has fallen prey to Eastern lassitude and decadence, becoming even more cynical and disengaged.<sup>15</sup>

The notion that opium addiction is emblematic of the Orient and the Eastern way of life has been common in

Western representations of Asia. In truth, however, opium was a vital component of Western commerce and colonial rule. Alfred W. McCoy outlines this history:

In the 1500s European merchants introduced opium smoking; in the 1700s the British East India Company became Asia's first large-scale opium smuggler, forcibly supplying an unwilling China; and in the 1800s every European colony had its official opium dens. At every stage of its development, Asia's narcotics traffic has been shaped and formed by the rise and fall of Western empires. . . . By the late nineteenth century the government opium den was as common as the pith helmet, and every nation and colony in Southeast Asia--from North Borneo to Burma--had a state-regulated opium monopoly. . . . While the health and vitality of the local population literally went up in smoke, the colonial governments thrived: opium sales provided as much as 40 percent of colonial revenues and financed the building of many Gothic edifices, railways, and canals that remain as the hallmark of the colonial era. (59-63)

In Vietnam, the French established an opium franchise six months after annexing Saigon in 1862. By 1918 in Indochina there were 1,512 opium dens and 3,098 retail shops vending opium. At this time, according to McCoy, opium made up more than one-third of all colonial revenues in French Indochina (McCoy 73-74). In an essay on "the Poisoning of the Natives," Ho Chi Minh notes that "There existed [in Annam] 1500 alcohol and opium shops for a thousand villages, while there were only ten schools serving the same area" (qtd. in Hodgkin 180). Although its possession was illegal in France, in Indochina the French purchased and processed opium, and they sold it through a



state-run monopoly at a profit of between 400 and 500 percent (Jamieson 62). McCoy describes the human consequences of the French opium trade in Vietnam:

Large numbers of plantation workers, miners, and urban laborers spent their entire salaries in the opium dens. The strenuous work, combined with the debilitating effect of the drug and lack of food, produced some extremely emaciated laborers, who could only be described as walking skeletons. Workers often died of starvation, or more likely their families did. While only 2 percent of the population were addicts, the toll among the Vietnamese elite was considerably greater. With an addiction rate of almost 20 percent, the native elite, most of whom were responsible for local administration and tax collection, were made much less competent and much more liable to corruption by their expensive opium habits. (75-76)

The essential link between Asians and opium that is suggested by Greene functions ideologically to obscure the Western powers' promotion, distribution, and sale of opium in the Far East. Greene treats a profitable institution established and perpetuated by the colonial powers as an innate trait of colonial subjects--as seen in Phuong's repeated association with opium.

In addition to being portrayed as a form of addiction and a natural or useful object, Phuong is described as irrational. She is "wonderfully ignorant" (4) and should not be subjected to a "passion for truth" because this is "an Occidental passion" (73-74). It does not occur to Fowler that this ostensible ignorance might be the product

of linguistic and cultural difference, that it might be an attempt to maintain a private sphere separate from the ubiquitous and prying colonialist, or that it might be the result of a colonial system that denied education to the vast majority of Vietnamese, especially to women. According to Virginia Thompson, prior to the establishment of the French colonial system, "at least 80 percent of the people were literate to some degree" (qtd. in Hodgkin 185), while under French colonialism, according to the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, "The rate of literacy . . . decreased considerably. Higher education ceased altogether" (7).

The French transformed education in Vietnam, instituting a system whose main goal was to train a small percentage of the populus to become subordinate officials serving the colonial administration. (Ironically, from this elite group came many of the founding members of the Vietnamese revolution.) By 1907, Francois Rodier, ex-Lieutenant-Governor of Cochin-China, could declare that "Annamites continue to speak their own language, but they no longer know how to read it or write it. That is why I have said we turn them into illiterates" (qtd. in Hodgkin 185). By the 1920s, of two million school age children, only 200,000 received any schooling at all. Thompson notes, "this meant literacy for only one boy out of twelve or for one girl in a hundred" (qtd. in Hodgkin 186).<sup>16</sup> If

Phuong is ignorant, it is likely due to a system that denied her education because of her nationality and gender.

Besides ignorance and unfamiliarity with truth, an essential element of Asian consciousness, according to Fowler, is the inability to experience the full range of human emotions. Prefiguring comments like those made by General Maxwell Taylor, who noted that Americans "place higher value on human life than [Vietnamese] do," and General William Westmoreland, who asserted that "life is cheap in the Orient" (qtd. in Baritz 5), Fowler declares that "Love's a Western word. . . . we use it for sentimental reasons or to cover up an obsession with one woman. These people don't suffer from obsessions" (126).

In arguing that Asians are incapable of love, Fowler rationalizes Phuong's refusal to love him and justifies his continued sexual exploitation of her. There are many reasons Phuong does not love Fowler, perhaps the foremost being the gross economic disparity between them. Phuong's goals are understandably mercenary: aided by her protective older sister, she is "determined on a good European marriage" (32). Although little of her background is known--Pathak, et al. observing that "Phuong is without a history; there is a noticeable absence of cultural markers of class, religion, education" (205)--it is safe to assume that Phuong is economically disadvantaged. Her de-

sire for a European marriage--and the fact that although "the most beautiful girl in Saigon" (35) she remains with Fowler, "a man of middle age, with eyes a little blood-shot, beginning to put on weight, ungraceful in love" (32)--are best explained as resulting from her economic insecurity. Fowler uses his economic and social superiority to gain Phuong's sexual favors; Phuong serves (and services) Fowler because she longs for a secure and comfortable life. This exploitation of economic advantage for sexual gain is common to First World nationals in the Third World, as Fowler readily admits: "Every correspondent, it was assumed, had his local girl" (64).

Women in the Third World are often doubly oppressed, victims of capitalist underdevelopment and patriarchal repression. Based on statistics compiled by the United Nations and the International Labour Organization, Jeanne Bisilliat and Michele Fieloux estimate that women account for half the world's population and two-thirds of the world's total working hours but (as of 1983) only one-hundredth of the world's wealth and property (Schipper 9). Alan Durning explains the hardships women undergo in the global economy:

Women's burdens multiply endlessly. They are paid less than men but they work more. They are less well educated, but bear greater responsibility for the health of children. They are expected to give birth to, raise, and feed numerous--preferably male--offspring and consequently grow weak and ailing as their

bodies are exhausted by the cycle of repeated pregnancy and childbirth. They are commonly abused and beaten at home, but have few legal rights and fewer property rights. For poor women, as one Brazilian woman says, "the only holiday . . . is when you are asleep." (139-40)

Faced with limited opportunities and constrained by a patriarchal culture,<sup>17</sup> it is entirely understandable that Phuong should serve as Fowler's maid and mistress with the hope that she might one day marry him and move to England.

Although her silences and her willingness to leave him for Pyle reveal how little genuine feeling Phuong has for Fowler, Greene draws a clear distinction between her behavior and prostitution. The first time Fowler saw Phuong she was "dancing past [his] table at the Grand Monde in a white ball dress, eighteen years old, watched by an elder sister" (32). Greene makes certain to tell us that "It had been a long and frustrating courtship. . . . three months passed before [Fowler] saw her so much as momentarily alone" (33). Greene also draws a clear distinction between Fowler and colonial debauchees like the anonymous rubber planter in whose apartment

was an extraordinary tall ashtray . . . made like a naked woman with a bowl in her hair, and there were china ornaments of naked girls embracing tigers, and one very odd one of a girl stripped to the waist riding a bicycle. In the bedroom, facing his enormous bed, was a great glazed oil painting of two girls sleeping together. (152)



Fowler, well aware of how pitiful and absurd is this scene, can in no way be compared to this comic relic of colonialism. In fact, Fowler "was tempted to ask him whether he would sell himself with his collection: he went with them; he was period too" (153). Greene also distinguishes Fowler from whore-mongering journalists like Bill Granger, who warns Pyle, "You got to be careful in [Saigon]. . . Thank God for penicillin" (27).

Greene shows the prevalence of prostitution in Vietnam, at one point describing a bordello--the House of the Five Hundred Girls. In its courtyard "Hundreds of girls lay . . . talking to their companions." And he shows the desperation of these "fighting, scrabbling, shouting girls" as they pursue potential customers:

I had learned a technique--to divide and conquer. I chose one in the crowd that gathered round me and edged her slowly towards the spot where Pyle and Granger struggled. . . .I caught sight of Granger flushed and triumphant; it was as though he took this demonstration as a tribute to his manhood. One girl had her arm through Pyle's and was trying to tug him gently out of the ring. I pushed my girl in among them. . . .I got hold of Pyle's sleeve and dragged him out, with the girl hanging onto his other arm like a hooked fish. Two or three girls tried to intercept us before we got to the gateway. (30-31)

While acknowledging that prostitution in late colonial Vietnam is widespread, that Westerners there regularly sexually exploit native women, and that these women are often desperate to gain the favor of relatively well-off

Westerners, Greene is careful to separate Fowler and Phuong from this background, to show that Fowler is no crass exploiter, Phuong no prostitute. Despite the similarity between their relationship and the colonial master/mistress relationship, Fowler and Phuong remain apart from this system of male colonialist exploitation. It can even be argued (her domestic and sexual subservience notwithstanding) that Phuong maintains a measure of control in their relationship.<sup>18</sup> Yet, in spite of the care with which Greene distances them from the pattern of Western male exploitation of Third World females, their relationship fits this pattern exactly.

No matter how Greene extenuates Fowler's relationship with Phuong, it remains exploitative--and it comes out of a long history of and foreshadows an even worse exploitation. First World males' desires for exotic, subservient Third World girls, especially within a global capitalist system that maintains a gender and race-based division of labor, have had devastating consequences for poor women. Nowhere is this more true than in Southeast Asia. The harsh conditions brought about by a crumbling empire and a revolutionary war made prostitution a necessary occupation for many Vietnamese women during the early 1950s. The French gave official sanction to prostitution through the "Bordel Mobile de Campagne," which Karnow describes as "an authorized bordello that travelled with the troops" (440).



According to Susan Brownmiller, these mobile field brothels were made up of women imported from Algeria (Against 93).

By the time of full-scale American intervention in the mid-1960s, prostitution was rampant in South Vietnam; there were even brothels on some U.S. military installations. Brownmiller describes one such base:

[In the] "recreation area" belonging to the base camp . . . was a one-acre compound surrounded by barbed wire with American MP's standing guard at the gate. It was opened only during daylight hours for security reasons. Inside the compound there were shops that sold hot dogs, hamburgers and souvenirs, but the main attraction was two concrete barracks, each about one hundred feet long--the military whorehouses that serviced the four-thousand-man brigade. Each building was outfitted with two bars, a bandstand, and sixty curtained cubicles in which the Vietnamese women lived and worked. (Against 94-95)

Most prostitution in Vietnam, though, was not organized and sanctioned. Rather, it developed in cities and outside of military bases as a means of survival for young women in this war-ravaged nation. Frances Fitzgerald notes the destructive social consequences of the American military presence:

there had grown up entire towns made of packing cases and waste tin . . . entire towns advertising Schlitz, Coca-Cola, or Pepsi Cola a thousand times over. . . . a series of packing-case towns with exactly three kinds of industry--the taking in of American laundry, the selling of American cold drinks to American soldiers, and prostitution for the benefit of the Americans. (470-71)

Karnow draws a similarly grim picture of the consequences of U.S. policy in Vietnam:

An estimated four million men, women, and children--roughly a quarter of South Vietnam's population--fled to the fringes of cities and towns in an attempt to survive. They were shunted into makeshift camps of squalid shanties where primitive sewers bred dysentery, malaria, and other diseases. Thousands, desperate to eke out a living, drifted into Saigon, Da-nang, Bienhoa, and Vung Tau, cities that now acquired an almost medieval cast as beggars and hawkers roamed the streets, whining and tugging at Americans for money. (439)

The increase in prostitution that occurred during the war was part of the larger destruction of traditional Vietnamese society, a destruction initiated by rapid (and often forced) urbanization, by the break-up of families through the lure of American affluence, by an expanding narcotics trade, by widespread graft and corruption. Fitzgerald notes that the importation of American goods led to runaway inflation (between 1965 and 1967 the cost of living in Vietnamese cities rose 170 percent) and the destruction of both the local agricultural and industrial sectors. In the new Americanized economy, there were some who profited: "the hotel owners . . . the licensed importers, the brothel keepers, real estate dealers, diamond merchants, and distributors of American luxury goods" (Fitzgerald 466-67). To Fitzgerald, the transformation of the Vietnamese economy, with its attendant human suffering, was

not an unforeseen consequence of the war but was part of a conscious strategy. "The United States," Fitzgerald writes, "would win the war by making all Vietnamese economically dependent upon it" (470). Besides American bombs, it was American wealth that shattered Vietnamese society and caused poor women to eke out livings as bar girls and prostitutes.

The increase in prostitution accompanying American intervention was not limited to Vietnam--it took place throughout Southeast Asia, particularly in the Philippines and Thailand: "Manila was competing internationally with Bangkok," Sterling Seagrove claims, "as the top destination for sex tours" (318). The sex tourism industry grew out of the widespread prostitution that accompanied the American military presence in both countries. Seagrove discusses the

large child brothels around the U.S. military bases at Subic Bay and Clark [Air Force Base]. . . . By both bases, children as young as fourteen months were bought, sold, and traded for the gratification of GI pedophiles. (321)

In Thailand prostitution was encouraged by a 1967 agreement with the U.S. that designated Thailand an official destination for American troops on R & R (rest and recreation). This agreement, asserts Aaron Sachs, gave

the sex tourism industry what amounted to official sanction. . . . Less than a decade later, Thailand could claim 20,000 brothels and other sex-industry establishments; and the hyped mythology of the young, submissive, sexy girls waiting for wealthy tourists in sultry Southeast Asia was making its way around the world. (28)

The American presence in Thailand (eight major bases and 46,000 servicemen) transformed Thai culture, bringing, in the words of Benedict Anderson,

"Americanization" to rural Siam in a very immediate way. The construction of these installations poured money into the countryside, but also meant the penetration of the sleaziest aspects of American civilization. The results were a vast increase in prostitution, births of "red-haired" (fatherless Amerasian) children, narcotics addiction, and the like. (24)

Anderson cites Wiraprawat Wongphuaphan's account of the township of Takhli, which became the site of an American airbase in 1961 (for missions over Laos and the Ho Chi Minh Trail). By 1972 there were more bars and nightclubs in Takhli than Buddhist temples (and as of 1982 there were twice as many prostitutes as Buddhist monks in Thailand [Muecke 892]). The increase in American airmen that accompanied Nixon's 1972 bombing campaign against North Vietnam was accompanied by an increase in venereal disease--91 prostitutes checked in for VD inspections in January 1972, 2,954 in June (Anderson 23-24).<sup>19</sup>

Most prostitutes in Thailand are recruited from poor, rural villages, since, according to the International La-

bor Organization, Thai women can make about 25 times more in the sex industry than in any other available occupation (Sachs 26). In 1979, Noi, a twenty year-old Thai woman, made about \$1.50 a day working in a battery factory, which was, she claimed, "not enough to cover my expenses. How could this be enough to pay for my food, my bus ticket and other expenses? . . . I have to find work at night so that I can send money to my parents" (qtd. in Fuentes and Ehrenreich 26).

Perhaps, considering the exploitative nature of the work demanded of women in factories in much of the Third World, there is no great distinction between this work and prostitution. In both professions women are underpaid, are chosen for their youth, health, and docility, and are forced to work under difficult and potentially harmful conditions.<sup>20</sup> The similarity between prostitution and labor exploitation can be seen in the following announcements, the first from a Swiss tour operator's description of Thai women, the second from a Malaysian government investment brochure:

[Thai women] are slim, sun-burnt and sweet . . . masters of the art of making love by nature. (qtd. in Robinson 416)

The manual dexterity of the Oriental female is famous the world over. Her hands are small, and she works fast with extreme care. . . . Who, therefore, could be better qualified by nature and inheritance, to contribute to the efficiency of a bench-assembly production line than the Oriental girl? (qtd. in Fuentes and Ehrenreich 16)

Considering the exploitative nature of factory work in the Third World, it is no wonder that many poor women "choose" more lucrative employment as prostitutes. The legacy of the Vietnam War, an indigenous patriarchal culture (with a gender division of labor), and its position within the global economy have combined to produce in Thailand a sex tourism industry worth \$5 billion annually and comprising 2 million women, 800,000 of whom are under 16 years old.<sup>21</sup>

Vietnam's isolation from the capitalist world economy has hampered the development of a sex tourism industry. But with the dismantling of its revolutionary government, there has begun a resurgence in prostitution. While most of the clientele are Vietnamese, foreign sex tours have become increasingly popular in Ho Chi Minh City and the beach resort of Vung Tau. Ginger Ladd, Susan Brownmiller, and the Economist all attribute these developments to Vietnam's embrace of capitalism. To Ladd, "sexual promiscuity, long repressed by the country's communist government, has exploded since it began loosening social and economic controls in 1986"; to Brownmiller, "prostitution is one of the growth industries in the new Vietnam" ("After" 82); to the Economist, "economic progress has been accompanied by what the government calls 'negative phenomena': robbery, prostitution and various forms of corruption" (38). Brownmiller argues that the commodification of women has accompanied the economic transformation of many formerly communist nations:

efforts to overhaul unworkable economic systems and attract foreign investment go hand in hand with an unobtrusive retooling of the role and image of women. A traveler goes to Beijing or Hanoi or Moscow or Prague and notes that the women are dressing more colorfully, a pleasing sign (who could object?) that the country is loosening its authoritarian restraints. Next, calendars and tourist brochures featuring buxom young women with come-hither smiles and pre-revolutionary attire put in an appearance, followed by beauty contests and imported pornography. Finally and inescapably, battalions of young recruits, so new at the trade that their shame is more evident than their seductive skills, are dragooned into selling their bodies for quick gain. ("After" 83)

Thus far in Vietnam HIV infection has been limited mostly to intravenous drug users (whose drug of choice is an adulterated form of opium.) The Vietnam News reports that in each district of Ho Chi Minh City there are now between 5 and 15 opium dens, each receiving between 150 and 200 customers per day. Phan Nguyen Binh, director of Ho Chi Minh City's Drug Abuse and Prevention Center, attributes the soaring number of drug abusers in recent years to "the increasing availability of opium since Vietnam opened its doors to foreign trade" (Ladd). There has also been an increase in child prostitution, Vietnamese researchers reporting girls as young as 12 being sold into prostitution by their parents. Seeing abused child prostitutes as victims of the new Vietnam, Dr. Duong Quyn Hoa, former Health Minister for the National Liberation Front/Provisional Revolutionary Government laments, "We fought for freedom, independence, and social justice. . . . Now it's all mon-

ey. You can count on your fingers the revolutionaries who still believe in ideals" (qtd. in Brownmiller, Against 84). With an increase in prostitution and opium addiction and a desperate need for foreign capital, Vietnam seems to be returning to what it had been forty years earlier--when Greene penned The Quiet American.

In The Quiet American Greene presents an attitude toward Asian female sexuality that has contributed to widespread suffering throughout southeast Asia. A sex tour operator's notion that Thai women "are slim, sun-burnt and sweet . . . masters of the art of making love by nature" is not much different from Fowler's rhapsody over women with "skin the colour of amber" (14) who "twitter and sing on your pillow" (5). As the first novel to gain critical attention for its examination of the role of the U.S. in Vietnam, The Quiet American established a pattern that subsequent American novels about the war have repeated, regardless of their sometimes drastically different aesthetics. In these novels, the Vietnamese remain invisible. Written from an American perspective, these novels see Vietnamese much as did American servicemen--as a shadowy and elusive enemy almost inseparable from the Vietnamese landscape, as the carnage and refuse of battle, as sexual objects. What Pathak, et al. note about The Quiet American is true for the vast majority of Vietnam War novels: "The Vietnamese people exist as a dismembered



race, as bodies flung in the pond at Phatdiem, as a woman with a mutilated baby in her lap. This is modern Orientalism" (204).

Greene's perception of the motives behind U.S. policy has also been consistently echoed in later novels and memoirs. While critical of the nature of U.S. policy, Vietnam War authors have either endorsed the view that this policy stemmed from noble if tragically flawed aims or have ignored this question, concentrating instead upon the day-to-day experiences of American soldiers. Unlike those critics who see The Quiet American as forecasting U.S. military and diplomatic policy in Vietnam, I see it as prefiguring an ethnocentric view of the war that ignores the Vietnamese, does not seriously challenge American exceptionalism, and does not recognize the suffering and inequity reproduced by global capital.

## Notes

1. The Quiet American, 87, 88.

2. It is not surprising that literary culture should begin (albeit moderately and largely within the liberal view of the war) to historicize The Quiet American. A complete separation of art and politics, scholarship and experience, could not be maintained (that this separation lasted as long as it did is a testament to the power of the non-ideological ideology of New Criticism/liberal pluralism). With the war raging on, with its grim reality broadcast nightly, with domestic protest mounting, American literary culture could not blithely persist in its preoccupation with formal and mannered readings of literary texts. As scholars continued to write about "la condition humaine," anti-war protests exploded across college campuses. During the first six months of 1969 alone (and counting only 232 of the country's two thousand colleges and universities), 215,000 students took part in campus protests, 3,652 were arrested, 956 were suspended or expelled. According to the F.B.I., in the 1969-1970 school year there were 1,785 student demonstrations (Zinn 481).

I do not mean to imply that literary culture was suddenly radicalized by the war. Its inherent conservatism remained largely intact, and its scholarship continued to focus on textual matters far removed from the political concerns of the day. Nonetheless, inspired by opposition

to the war, by the civil rights movement, and the rise of feminism, literary culture slowly began to incorporate social issues into its practice. Also contributing to the incipient politicizing of literary studies was recognition of the university's role in perpetuating the war. As Theodore Roszak declared in 1968,

the war is very largely a product of the academic community's own cultural default. . . . The advisers who have moved both the Kennedy and the Johnson administrations toward the war are, for the most part, prestigious and conventionally liberal academics from our best schools. . . . Further, the very fact that the war has been able to creep steadily and without specific debate from a marginal commitment to a major preoccupation of our society has much to do with the silence and caution that characterized our universities prior to 1965. (vi)

If the scholarship written about The Quiet American is any indication, the academic literary establishment likewise helped maintain this silence and caution. Members of bourgeois institutions that contributed directly to the war and that relied upon the affluence generated by U.S. global policy, professors of English (like professors in other disciplines) provided tacit support for U.S. actions in Vietnam. Some in the literary culture recognized their own complicity. Louis Kampf, for instance, declared, "The health of the profession, the superabundance of respectable jobs, and the academy's general affluence all depend on the Cold War and its occasional hot outbursts" (49). To Kampf, quite simply, "As our overseas markets expand, so do our English

departments; the more Vietnams, the more endowed chairs" (50).

3. Although concerned with the accuracy of Greene's examination of U.S. motive, Larsen echoes the arguments made by formalist literary critics. His assertion that Greene denounces the tendency to embrace abstraction over real thought is not much different from Roger Sharrock's assertion that Greene distrusts initiatives supported by theoretical premisses or Gangeshwar Rai's notion that Greene repudiates involvement in politics inspired by abstract ideological conviction. What separates Larsen from these critics is his identification of this sympathy for abstraction over real thought as a particularly American trait.

4. In their examination of 36 studies on underdevelopment in the Third World, Volker Bornschier and Christopher Chase-Dunn conclude that "a high degree of penetration and control by transnational corporations . . . has a long-run retardant effect on economic growth and is associated with greater income inequality" (xi). Specifically, Bornschier and Chase-Dunn explain that

The poorest 40 percent of the world's population had 4.9 percent of world income in 1950, and 4.2 percent in 1977, and the gap between the poorest and riches halves of the world's population is increasing. . . . The overall inequality of world income has not increased much, however, because the upper middle income groups have gained, mostly at the expense of the poor. (62)

Alan Durning finds the gap between rich and poor increasing during the 1980s. According to Durning,

Since 1950, the gap between rich and poor nations has grown mostly because the rich got richer. But since 1980, in many developing countries the poor have been getting poorer too. Forty-three developing nations probably finished the decade poorer, in per capita terms, than they started it. The 14 most devastated--including Zambia, Bolivia, and Nigeria--have seen per capita income plunge as dramatically since their troubles began as the United States did during the Great Depression. Indeed, the term developing nation has become a cruel parody: many countries are not so much developing as they are disintegrating.

For an example of the connection between "development" and disease, I turn to the recent outbreak of pneumonic plague in Surat, India. According to Praful Bidwai, although Surat "is the most important industrial town" (480) in a section of India known as the Golden Corridor for its decade-long growth rate, its sewer system services only an eight percent of the city, a phenomenon "replicated on a national scale" in India. Tying this plague outbreak, and health problems in general, to Western-promoted capitalist development, Bidwai writes,

India, with its rash of growth enclaves, its newly opened markets and its consumption boom in the elite sector, has one of the lowest public health budgets in the world. . . . Finance Minister Manmohan Singh's new structural adjustment policy, implemented since mid-1991 under the tutelage of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, has aggravated the health crisis. Under pressure to reduce the deficit, Singh savagely cut spending on health, education and social

services. . . . Today in terms of G.D.P., India spends 10 to 20 percent less on the social sector than it did in the late 1980s. The result is a further drop in the already appalling quality of life and more destitution for the poor. (481)

5. Sometimes this generosity and innocence were not seen as exclusive to America but found to be characteristic of Western capitalism in general. According to Adam Ulam,

Problems of an international society undergoing an economic and ideological revolution seem to defy . . . the generosity--granted its qualifications and errors--that has characterized the policy of the leading democratic powers of the West. (qtd. in Chomsky, "Clinton Vision" 32)

6. Attempts to reconcile the historical record with American exceptionalism can sometimes lead to a rather tortured reasoning, as in this New York Times op-ed piece by Richard Spielman, a professor of international affairs:

It took the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait to reveal what should have been obvious all along to the foreign policy experts: the bipolar, cold war world has given way not to "multipolarity" but to "unipolarity," with the U.S. the only pole left. . . . But unipolarity is not the same as American hegemony. . . . A unipolar world is not the same as a hierarchical system dominated by a single power that creates the rules as well as enforces them. (qtd. in Kaplan 13)

7. For an example of the kind of argument I am making about the broad sympathy between American literary culture and the political establishment see Richard Ohmann, "A Case

Study in Canon Formation: Reviewers, Critics, and The  
Catcher in the Rye" in Politics and Letters. For Ohmann,

common sense and a belief in real connections between  
 people's ideas and their material lives are enough . .  
 . to make it seem natural for a critical establishment  
 . . . located in U.S. capitalism to interpret and judge  
 literary works in a way harmonious with the continuance  
 of capitalism. (66)

8. According to Marilyn Young, the "French" army "con-  
 sisted of approximately 80,000 French soldiers; 20,000 For-  
 eign Legionnaires, 10,000 of whom had served in Nazi armies;  
 48,000 gathered from France's other colonies; and some  
 300,000 Vietnamese" (29).

9. Similarly, after the Japanese surrender to the U.S.  
 in Korea, General John Reed Hodge (Commanding General,  
 United States Armed Forces in Korea) declared that what had  
 been the Japanese occupation government would continue to  
 function, without change in personnel. According to the New  
York Times, "the State Department . . . disclaimed any part  
 in military orders leaving the Japanese in office tempo-  
 rarily. . . . It was evidently a decision by the local the-  
 ater commander" (qtd. in Cumings 139). Bruce Cumings gives  
 a different explanation for U.S. policy:

a People's Republic had been proclaimed two days before  
 the American entry and might assume power if the Japa-  
 nese were run out. It is probably this revolutionary  
 situation that caused Hodge to murmur about chaos and  
 work closely with the Japanese. (139)

Cumings goes on to show how the U.S.-constructed and U.S.-trained Korean armed forces were made up of, according to Se-jin Kim, "officers with a Japanese [military] background" (qtd. in Cumings 175). Cumings writes,

In Japan, the American Occupation tried and executed a number of high Japanese and Korean militarists as war criminals and made "automatic purges" of "all former commissioned officers of the regular army, navy, and volunteer reserves." Yet in Korea such commissioned officers were rewarded with control of the [Armed Forces]. (176)

American willingness to allow (and even to encourage) Korean officers who had sympathized with the Japanese to control the Korean Armed Forces was due in large part to a desire to thwart an incipient nationalist and anti-capitalist movement in the newly liberated Korea.

10. For a detailed analysis of the political economy of French Indochina see Martin J. Murray, "The Development of Capitalism and the Making of the Working Class in Colonial Indochina, 1870-1940," in Proletarianisation in the Third World, ed. B. Munslow and H. Finch.

11. "Annam" was the name given the center of Vietnam by the French in order "to portray Vietnam as disunified" (Karnow 57), a divide-and-conquer strategy later employed by the U.S. with its construction of a North and South Vietnam.

12. Hollywood has also used women as symbols of Vietnam in such films as Full Metal Jacket and Casualties of War.



13. Chinua Achebe makes a similar argument about another English novelist who travelled in and wrote about the third world, Joseph Conrad. Achebe argues that

It might be contended . . . that the attitude to the African in Heart of Darkness is not Conrad's but that of his fictional narrator, Marlow, and that far from endorsing it Conrad might indeed be holding it up to irony and criticism. Certainly, Conrad appears to go to considerable pains to set up layers of insulation between himself and the moral universe of his story. . . . But if Conrad's intention is to draw a cordon sanitaire between himself and the moral and psychological malaise of his narrator, his care seems to be totally wasted because he neglects to hint, clearly and adequately, at an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinion of his characters. It would not have been beyond Conrad's power to make that provision if he had thought it necessary. Conrad seems to . . . approve of Marlow, with only minor reservations--a fact reinforced by the similarities between their two careers. (9-10)

14. Fowler's repeated reference to this native dress (the ao dai), to "the girls in the white silk trousers" (25), is meant to evoke the exoticism and sensuality of Vietnamese women. But Greene's use of the ao dai is misleading. For the large percentage of women who were peasants or were from the urban working class, the ao dai was reserved for feast days. Their usual dress was much less exotic and sensual--black cotton trousers and a black or white cotton blouse (Sully 72).

15. The full consequences of this dissolute life are seen in the appearance of a Chinaman, Mr. Chou, about whom Fowler declares,

He looked at me with the indifferent gaze of a smoker: the sunken cheeks, the baby wrists, the arms of a small girl--many years and many pipes had been needed to whittle him down to these dimensions. (119)

16. In contrast, as shown in Luong's sociocultural study of the village of Son-Duong, education was revitalized under communist rule:

The village school had begun offering junior high school classes as early as 1958-1959, being the third in the district to do so. By 1987, with 42 teachers, it offered up to grade twelve and had enrolled 1001 male and female students. The three nursery schools in the village also enrolled 120 pupils. The equal access to education for boys and girls stood in sharp contrast to the almost all-male enrollment of 35 students in the three-grade village school on the eve of the August 1945 uprising. (173)

17. Some of the features of traditional Vietnamese patriarchy are discussed by Luong, who writes of a gender-based division of labor and an "exclusive reserve of public power and societal leadership roles for men" (70). In the village he studied,

The main room of the house was a male domain where important guests were received and where the ancestral altar was located. Not only were junior female members of the household . . . unable to enter this main room in the presence of guests, but they reportedly had to cover their faces with conical hats when passing in front of it in the presence of male guests. (73)

18. Indeed, Pathak, et al. assert that "Phuong's twitter is silence as much as her silence is speech--both are

willed acts in the furtherance of her objective." Likewise, "Fowler's self-deception is a measure of her success in the deployment of speech and silence" (204).

19. Although prostitution in Thailand was promoted by the U.S. military presence there, it would be wrong to blame the U.S. exclusively. James Petras and Tienchai Wongchaisuwan point to "a historical legacy [in Thailand] of absolute monarchical rule based on controlling and exploiting slaves, serfs, women, and children." And they argue that the sex industry has been vital to capitalist development in Thailand: "The secret of Thai growth is based on economic activity which is very profitable and has a specialized niche in the global marketplace: prostitution, the child sex trade, and child labor" (35). Thus in 1980 Deputy Prime Minister Booncha Rojanasathian recommended that provincial governors encourage

certain entertainment activities which some . . . may find disgusting and embarrassing because they are related to sexual pleasures. . . . We must do this because we have to consider the jobs that will be created for people. (qtd. in Muecke 896)

Several commentators (Petras and Wongchaisuwan, Robinson, Sachs) have even asserted that, in encouraging Thailand to promote its tourism industry, the World Bank gave tacit approval to the Thai sex tourism industry. According to Sachs,

In 1971, Robert McNamara, the president of the World Bank. . . without specifically mentioning the sex industry, urged Thailand to supplement its export activities with an all-out effort to attract rich foreigners to the country's various tourist facilities. After all, spending by U.S. military personnel on R & R in Thailand had quadrupled between 1967 and 1970, from about \$5 billion to about \$20 billion. McNamara was probably well aware of that trend, because he just happened to have been Secretary of Defense under President Lyndon B. Johnson at the time of the infamous R & R treaty. And he would have had to be unimaginably naive not to know that R & R usually meant sex.

By 1975, Thailand, with the help of World Bank economists, had instituted a National Plan of Tourist Development, which specifically underwrote the sex industry. The new plan basically just buttressed the 1966 Entertainment Places Act, the national law that had made possible the international R & R treaty. Without directly subsidizing prostitution, the Entertainment Places Act, referring repeatedly to the "personal services" sector, gave encouragement to pimps and brothel owners by suggesting creative ways in which to develop their industry. . . . The Act also made it clear that the proprietors of entertainment establishments could feel free to hire whomever they wanted: the maximum fine for employing a "hostess" or "masseuse" under the age of 18 was 2000 baht--or about \$100. (28-29)

20. Women are singled out by multinational corporations: globally, they comprise 80 percent of the work force in the assembly industry, 85 percent in electronics (Mattelart 111). Besides for their dexterity, women are chosen by multinational corporations because they are perceived to be more compliant. As Fuentes and Ehrenreich argue, "Multinationals want a workforce that is docile, easily manipulated and willing to do boring, repetitive assembly work. Women, they claim, are the perfect employees" (12).

21. Sachs describes Asia as the center of the child sex industry, with 60,000 child prostitutes in the Philippines,

400,000 in India, 20,000 (most of them boys) in Sri Lanka. Sachs and Petras/Wongchaisuwan note that recruitment of child prostitutes has spread into Burma, Nepal, Cambodia, Laos, and China.

In addition to the social destruction wrought in South-east Asia by the sex industry, there has developed a growing AIDS epidemic. Ironically, as the incidence of AIDS rises, the age of recruitment of child prostitutes declines to meet the demand for uncontaminated girls (in Thailand it has been estimated that 6.2 to 8.7 percent of females between the ages of 15 and 35 have been employed in the sex industry [Robinson 494]; child prostitution is the major occupation for children 10 to 16 [Petras and Wongchaisuwan 36]). It has further been estimated that 40 percent of child prostitutes in Thailand are HIV positive (Petras and Wongchaisuwan 38). In 1993, 600,000 Thais were infected with AIDS, and there were approximately 1200 new cases per day (Petras and Wongchaisuwan 38); in India, over one million people are HIV-positive (Barnathan, et al. 357). By the year 2000, as many as one-third of all deaths in Thailand may be caused by AIDS, and in Asia more than a million people annually will become infected with HIV (Robinson 497, Barnathan, et al. 357).

## CHAPTER 4

## WAGING WAR AGAINST TOTALITY

It is repugnant for honest people to think that the government of a country with the standing of the United States had, for many years, premeditated, prepared, and planned, down to the most minute details, systematic aggression; a criminal war of genocide and biocide against a small people, a small country situated 10,000 kilometers and more from America's frontiers; to think that this government for many years on end has deliberately and knowingly lied to cover up the crime, to hide its plans and deceive American public opinion.

--North Vietnamese pamphlet, 1971

"Daddy, tell the truth," Kathleen can say, "did you ever kill anybody?" And I can say honestly, "Of course not."

Or I can say, honestly, "Yes."

--Tim O'Brien

To some critics The Quiet American significantly influenced subsequent literary representations of the Vietnam War. Thomas Myers writes, "The shadow cast over the entire American corpus of Vietnam works by Greene's work . . . is indeed a large one" (38). Generally, though, the influence of Greene's novel has been minor. American novelists of the war have moved away, in Gordon Taylor's words, "from a center Greene seems at once still to occupy and no longer usefully to provide," and have instead sought to exploit "the resources of several genres rather than settle into established prose patterns," reflecting

"internally on problems of literary procedure presented by new social and psychic 'information' generated by the war" (qtd. in Melling 93). In other words, contemporary authors have employed a postmodern aesthetic because its dialogical content and its recognition of the uncertain and mediated nature of reality is perceived as a more accurate rendering of the Vietnam War and of contemporary experience. To many academics, the defamiliarizing strategies and heterogeneity of postmodernism are also connected to a radical political vision. In this chapter, after briefly defining postmodernism and explaining why it often is tied to the Vietnam War, I will examine Tim O'Brien's The Things They Carried as a representative postmodern text, focusing 1) on O'Brien's use of a postmodern aesthetic, 2) on how this aesthetic reinforces an ethnocentric and individualist perspective, and 3) on how postmodern anti-totalization thwarts an understanding of the systemic causes and consequences of historical events like the Vietnam War.

Discussions of postmodernism commonly begin with assertions about its uncertain definition and multiple meanings. John Carlos Rowe writes of "the ambiguity of the postmodern" and of "the different ways the term has been used to characterize a wide range of social, aesthetic, economic, and political phenomena" (179). Fredric Jameson notes that the problem with postmodernism lies in "how its

fundamental characteristics are to be described, whether it even exists in the first place, whether the very concept is of any use, or is, on the contrary, a mystification" (55). "Of all the terms bandied about in both current cultural theory and contemporary writing," asserts Linda Hutcheon, "postmodernism must be the most over- and under-defined" (3). Definitions of postmodernism, then, are notoriously difficult and often do not convey the full range of contradictory meanings with which this term has been associated.

Nonetheless, I hope the following attempt at a definition will communicate much of what is associated with postmodernism. By "postmodernism" I mean what Lyotard identifies as "that severe reexamination . . . on the thought of the Enlightenment, on the idea of a unitary end of history and of a subject" (Condition 73). Or as Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux explain, postmodernism consists of a

refusal of grand narratives, [a] rejection of universal reason as a foundation for human affairs, [a] de-centering of the humanist subject, [and a] radical problematization of representation (61).

Postmodernism is the label given the tendency in contemporary thought to question the individual's ability to order and understand reality. Mediated by language, knowledge is seen as contingent, local, fragmentary--the site of on-



going discursive struggle. Objective reality, subjectivity, representation, and any totalizing schema--what Lyotard defines as "any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse" (xxiii)--are brought into question by postmodernism. If there were a credo for postmodernists, it would be Lyotard's call to "wage a war on totality; [and to] be witnesses to the unrepresentable" (Condition 82).<sup>2</sup>

That in attempting to document his experience in Vietnam O'Brien uses a postmodern aesthetic is understandable, since it is a widely accepted notion that, in order to render something of the sense-fracturing nature of contemporary life, literary texts must challenge such conventions of realist fiction as characterization, historical narration, description, causal sequence, and, adds Jerome Klinkowitz, "the belief that the world is predictable, not mysterious, and answerable to the writer's control" (140). If O'Brien is to tell the truth about Vietnam, therefore, he must endorse an aesthetic that questions the very possibility of truth.

Many critics have also seen a necessary link between postmodernism and the Vietnam War. For Jameson it was "the first terrible postmodernist war" (44), for Myers "a war that was at its core postmodern both in form and in historical message" (143). As Donald Ringnalda explains, "the war does not fit within the tidy perimeters of the

ethnocentric, traditional war narrative" (68) and thus requires a postmodern literary aesthetic. Or as Klinkowitz asserts,

the appropriate fictive responses to America's involvement in Vietnam will only be successful when they account for postmodern . . . techniques for dealing with a fundamentally unstructurable reality.  
(155)

Fragmented and unreal, the Vietnam War is thought to overwhelm conventional categories of understanding, leading critics like Klinkowitz to speak of "the void itself that Vietnam had become for us" (135) and to view the war as an experience that "could be described as one of uncertainty in the face of disrupted forms" (137). Similarly, Jameson suggests that the Vietnam War leads to "the breakdown of all previous narrative paradigms . . . along with the breakdown of any shared language through which a veteran may be said to convey such experience" (44).<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, reviewers praised O'Brien for conveying a sense of this almost unrepresentable war. To Robert R. Harris in the New York Times Book Review The Things They Carried "crystalizes the Vietnam experience for us." Likewise, to Julian Loose in the Times Literary Supplement O'Brien's is not "a merely fashionable reflectivity." Instead, by "creating a work which so adroitly resists

finality, O'Brien has been faithful both to Vietnam and to the stories told about it." And to Peter S. Prescott in Newsweek, "Straightforward wars are built like novels. . . . Messy wars, like the one we fought in Vietnam, lend themselves more readily to fragmented narratives."

The war, according to these critics, was defined by uncertainty--in motivation, history, strategy, official rhetoric, media representations, identification of friend and foe. For Klinkowitz, it was "a nonlinear war, with no objective to seize, no identifiable goal to achieve, and no overall end-date in sight" (148). Likewise, Myers speaks of the war's "chimerical, processive nature" (25), a perception stemming from an "unfamiliar geography, constantly shifting official pronouncements, absence of discernible objects, and decaying support at home" (35-36). Conventional notions of truth and reference were disrupted by the war. As Timothy Lomperis puts it,

with the facts of Vietnam in such a flux, perhaps some small measure of comfort can be taken in the certainty that eventually everyone will be wrong. The facts, in Vietnam, make liars of us all (59).

This indeterminacy, however, is at odds with a standard feature of war narratives--the need to bear witness. There remains a tension throughout The Things They Carried between O'Brien's belief in reality as an imaginative construct and his desire to tell the truth. This tension

begins with the title page, where The Things They Carried is identified as "a work of fiction by Tim O'Brien," and the opening epigraph, taken from John Ransom's Andersonville Diary, which asserts textual authenticity:

Those who have had any such experience as the author will see its truthfulness at once, and to all other readers it is commended as a statement of actual things by one who experienced them to the fullest.

Central among O'Brien's concerns is the attempt to reconcile fact and fiction, the real and the imagined. His aim is paradoxical and characteristically postmodern--to identify the fundamental nature of the Vietnam War while revealing the impossibility of such epistemological certainty, to reconcile historical accuracy with the inefable unreality of his experience in Vietnam. Ultimately, this reconciliation is sought through self-referentiality, through viewing the war not as past experience but as ongoing interpretation, as the very process of literary creation.

#### Postmodernism

The Things They Carried is a hybrid text, a collection of stories that functions as a novel. Characters and incidents are repeated from story to story and are refracted through several literary modes and through the O'Brien narrator/persona's shifting self-interest and

self-delusion. Thus The Things They Carried is an embodiment of the processive and indeterminate nature of consciousness; it seeks to replicate a veteran's struggle to make sense of war-time experience and memory. To show specifically how O'Brien's aesthetic works in The Things They Carried, I will concentrate on one incident--the death of his comrade Kiowa.

In the story "Speaking of Courage" O'Brien tells us his platoon bivouacked beside the Song Tra Bong River in what they discovered too late was "a shit field. The village toilet" (164). Rain transformed this field into "deep, oozy soup. . . . Like sewage" (164). During the night the platoon was bombarded by mortar fire that made the ground explode and boil. Kiowa began to drown in this shit field. Another soldier, Norman Bowker,

grabbed Kiowa by the boot and tried to pull him out. . . . then suddenly he felt himself going too. He could taste it. The shit was in his nose and eyes. . . and he could no longer tolerate it. . . . He released Kiowa's boot and watched it slide away. (168)

O'Brien repeatedly forces this image before us to convey the horror of war. Beyond its power to shock, this image serves as a metaphor for combat. To American soldiers in Vietnam "the shit" referred to "the day-to-day combat operations endured by GIs in the field" (Clark 463). O'Brien revivifies this conventional metaphor by making it

horribly tangible. That men's lives were wasted in Vietnam is likewise made literal by the shit field. Kiowa's death also evokes the notion that for the U.S. Vietnam was a quagmire; his drowning functions almost emblematically to suggest America's deepening entanglement in southeast Asia. "This field," O'Brien writes, "had embodied all the waste that was Vietnam" (210).

But it is not this particular metaphor that makes The Things They Carried memorable. From e.e. cummings's Olaf glad and big to Thomas Pynchon's Brigadier Pudding, writers have used coprophagia to suggest war's dehumanization. What is striking about O'Brien's novel is its elaborate and elusive self-consciousness. O'Brien gives us several versions of this incident and foregrounds his role in shaping these stories. In "Speaking of Courage," he tells us that Norman Bowker failed to save Kiowa. In "Notes," he reveals that Kiowa's death had been omitted from an earlier version of this story and that Bowker, haunted by that night, committed suicide. In still another story, "In the Field," O'Brien blames not Bowker but an unnamed soldier who instigated the mortar attack by carelessly turning on his flashlight. And in "Field Trip" O'Brien tells us about his return to the site of Kiowa's death years after the War. "That little field," he writes,

had swallowed so much. My best friend. My pride.  
My belief in myself as a man of some small dignity

and courage. Still, it was hard to find any real emotion. . . . After that long night in the rain, I'd seemed to grow cold inside, all the illusions gone, all the old ambitions and hopes for myself sucked away into the mud. (210)

Nowhere in The Things They Carried does O'Brien explain more clearly the psychic devastation wrought by wartime trauma. In order to overcome this trauma and to regain what he lost in Kiowa's death, O'Brien must confront his past, so he wades into the filthy river. Previously, he had "felt a certain smugness about how easily [he] had made the shift from war to peace" (179). Now he writes,

in a way . . . I'd gone under with Kiowa, and . . . after two decades I'd finally worked my way out. . . . I felt something go shut in my heart while something else swung open. (212)

Despite the conviction with which O'Brien recounts this incident and his repeated attempts to come to terms with his battlefield experiences, however, there is little reason to believe that what he tells us is true. For throughout The Things They Carried he suggests that the truth about the war, or for that matter any truth, is best seen as process, as an act of remembering and telling.

O'Brien sees truth and reality as indeterminate, as inseparable from their imaginative reconstruction. Accordingly, "What sticks to memory," he writes, "are those odd little fragments that have no beginning and no end" (39), fragments such as

A red clay trail outside the village of My Khe..  
 A hand grenade.  
 A slim, dead, dainty man of about twenty.  
 Kiowa saying, "No choice, Tim. What else could  
 you do?"  
 Kiowa saying, "Right?"  
 Kiowa saying, "Talk to me." (40)

O'Brien tells us how such fragments are reimagined in the process of writing. "I'm forty-three years old, and a writer now," he declares,

and the war has been over for a long while. Much of it is hard to remember. I sit at this typewriter and stare through my words and watch Kiowa sinking into the deep muck of a shit field . . . and as I write about these things, the remembering is turned into a kind of rehappening. (36)

Explaining how such fragments of memory are given significance and meaning by the imagination, O'Brien told Eric Schroeder: "we use our imaginations to deal with situations around us, not just to cope with them psychologically but, more importantly, to deal with them philosophically and morally" (139). In this sense, all of us are "spin" doctors, treating and reconstructing experience, giving it coherence and meaning and making it true through our imaginations.

This preoccupation with truth-telling is most vividly seen in "How to Tell a True War Story." Here O'Brien identifies his fiction as inherently accurate: "This is true" (75), he writes, "It's all exactly true" (77), "It



all happened" (83), "here's what actually happened" (85). But such insistence upon the truthfulness of his fiction, rather than reinforcing its essential accuracy, foregrounds the uncertain relationship between reality and textual representation. Because of its complex and contradictory character, the war for O'Brien can never be faithfully rendered: "the only certainty," he writes, "is overwhelming ambiguity" (88). He goes on to say that "in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true" (88). Yet it is through stories that experience is given the heft of truth: "As I write about these things," O'Brien tells us, "the remembering is turned into a kind of rehashing" (36). And this "story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth" (203).

O'Brien attempts to resolve this paradox--the need to tell the truth about an experience that is inherently unreal and which thereby defies conventional categories of true and false--by emphasizing the process of story-making. It is in this process that truth and falsehood, reality and representation, subject and object, fact and fiction cohere. Hence a true war story cannot be separated from its telling. By emphasizing artifice, by demonstrating the extent to which experience is an imaginative construct, O'Brien attempts to identify the important truths buried within his memories of Vietnam. To O'Brien self-referentiality is a necessary feature of truthful

writing, for only by emphasizing artifice can he write the truth, or as he suggests, "you tell lies to get at the truth" (Schroeder 141).

This obsession with conveying the truth, while uncharacteristic of postmodernism, is familiar to war narratives and, according to Kali Tal, is a defining feature of the literature of trauma. Reading the accounts of Holocaust and A-bomb survivors, rape and incest victims, and war veterans, Tal finds an "urge to bear witness, to carry the tale of horror back to the halls of normalcy and testify to the truth of the experience" (emphasis added, 229). O'Brien emphasizes the traumatic, obsessive nature of his experience by repeatedly circling back to specific incidents, such as Kiowa's death. Sometimes these incidents are merely alluded to. At other times, they are discussed at length but are approached from different angles and through different narratives, as if O'Brien must face these hard truths obliquely, defensively.

O'Brien's final story, "The Lives of the Dead," is unlike anything else in The Things They Carried. Its focus is broader, concentrating not on Vietnam but on those times throughout O'Brien's life when he was made aware of human mortality, from the death of childhood schoolmate Linda to numerous American and Vietnamese battle casualties. These confrontations with mortality scar O'Brien and shape his belief that the most important thing fiction

can do is reimagine the dead. "Stories," he suggests, "van save us. . . . in a story . . . the dead sometimes smile and sit up and return to the world" (255). Stories are a means of overcoming trauma, "a way of bringing body and soul back together" (267).<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, The Things They Carried functions as O'Brien's attempt to sort through the pieces of his life to begin connecting his fractured self into a sensible whole. "I'm forty-three years old," he writes in the novel's concluding passage,

and . . . still dreaming Linda alive. . . . in the spell of memory and imagination, I can still see her as if through ice. . . . I can see Kiowa . . . and sometimes I can even see Timmy skating with Linda. . . . I'm young and happy. I'll never die. I'm skimming across the surface of my own history . . . and when I take a high leap into the dark and come down thirty years later, I realize it is as Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story. (273)

In this conclusion O'Brien attempts to achieve psychic wholeness by reconnecting the boy he was before Vietnam with the man he has become. Also, he transforms the waste of Vietnam into the purity of ice, and the unstable ground which swallowed Kiowa into a solid surface meant to support his fractured psyche. Nonetheless, in its emptiness and coldness this final image suggests O'Brien has not fully regained his capacity to feel. And in skimming across the frozen surface of his own history, O'Brien avoids plumbing the depths of his troubled psyche, thus

replicating a veteran's ongoing struggle to make sense of war-time experience and memory.

### Ethnocentrism

Of course, a modernist or realist aesthetic is just as capable of rendering an individual soldier's tortured psyche. The difference alleged of a postmodern aesthetic is that it can capture something essential about the nature of contemporary life. Andreas Huyssen identifies

a slowly emerging cultural transformation in Western societies, a change in sensibility for which the term "post-modern" is actually, at least for now, wholly adequate. . . . in an important sector of our culture there is a noticeable shift in sensibility, practices and discourse formations which distinguishes a post-modern set of assumptions, experiences and propositions from that of a preceding period. (qtd. in Harvey 39)

Many cultural theorists concur, viewing postmodernism as a form of periodization--a means of defining the ways of life in the latter half of the twentieth century. There is a general consensus among them that a significant social and cultural change occurred after the second world war, that this change began to take visible shape by the early 1960s, and that this change can be labelled "post-modern."<sup>5</sup>

The most influential explanation for this change is probably Jameson's notion that postmodernism arose with

the onset of late capitalism, what he describes as a "vision of a world capitalist system fundamentally distinct from the older imperialism" (xix). For Jameson, late capitalism is defined by the growth of transnational corporations, and

its features include the new international division of labor, a vertiginous new dynamic in international banking and the stock exchanges (including the enormous Second and Third World debt), new forms of media interrelationship . . . computers and automation, the flight of production to advanced Third World areas, along with all the more familiar social consequences, including the crisis of traditional labor, the emergence of yuppies and gentrification on a now-global scale. (xix)

"To grant some historic originality to a postmodernist culture," writes Jameson, "is also implicitly to affirm some radical structural difference between what is sometimes called consumer society and earlier moments of capitalism from which it emerged" (55). The destruction of the colonial order, the spread of multinational corporations, the deindustrialization of the West and the growth of developing nations, the global reach of American popular culture, the ubiquity of television, the influence of non-linear scientific theories, and the rise of identity politics have combined to shatter the modern age, with its enlightenment-derived pursuit of a comprehensive and sys-

tematic understanding of the world. In its place has arisen a culture marked by fragmentation, heterogeneity, uncertainty, simulation, parody, and pastiche.

As such, postmodernism is considered a corrective to the harm caused by the enlightenment emphasis on reason and objectivity. In opposing the enlightenment paradigm, postmodernism is seen as providing space for individuals, groups, and beliefs that heretofore have been marginalized by the various metanarratives that comprise the Western tradition. Postmodernism, alleges Hutcheon,

[has] become a most popular and effective strategy . . . of black, ethnic, gay, and feminist artists--trying to come to terms with and to respond, critically and creatively, to the still predominantly white, heterosexual, male culture in which they find themselves. (37)

Accordingly, many contemporary theorists find in postmodernism itself a necessary counter-force (what Aronowitz and Giroux label "an emancipatory postmodernism" [19]) to the exclusionary politics of modernism/formalism and the mystified ideology of positivism. The discourse of postmodernism is replete with a radical-sounding rhetoric concerned with opposing tyranny and recognizing the marginal and the oppressed. As Hal Foster suggests, postmodernism "seeks to question rather than exploit cultural codes, to explore rather than conceal social and political affiliations" (xii). Indeed, many postmodernists allege its po-

litical potential: Jerry Varsava notes that postmodernism may "contribute in some measure to the formation of a more radically heterogeneous and democratic world" (188); Hutcheon asserts that postmodernism aims to "chang[e] consciousness through art" (202); Aronowitz and Giroux define postmodernism as the "intellectual expression" of "radical democracy" (185).

It is important to note, however, that postmodernism is not a global phenomenon. To the vast number of people who live in pre- rather than post-industrial conditions, who live in rural communities with subsistence-level agricultural economies, the world has not been fragmented and simulated in startling new ways but remains stubbornly solid and painfully real. As of 1989, according to the Worldwatch Institute, 1.2 billion people lived in absolute poverty, and, writes Alan Durning, "Despite rapid urbanization and growing urban poverty in much of the world, four fifths of those in absolute poverty still live in rural areas" (139)--a fact not easily reconciled with Jameson's vision of "a world capitalist system fundamentally distinct from the older imperialism" with "gentrification on a now-global scale."

I do not mean to suggest that living conditions have remained static; on the contrary, the postwar period has seen rapid urbanization and development throughout the Third World . But while this transformation has acceler-

ated the globalization of capital, it has not led to a high-tech, postindustrial global economy. Instead, the Third World has undergone massive industrialization. Paul Kellogg details the extent of this transformation:

Employment in manufacturing grew by 65 per cent in Turkey between 1960 and 1982, 179 per cent in Egypt between 1958 and 1981, 623 per cent in Tanzania between 1953 and 1981, 57 per cent in Zimbabwe . . . 1970-80, 212 per cent in Brazil 1970-82, 34 per cent in Peru 1971-1981 and an astonishing 2,500 per cent in South Korea between 1956 and 1982! On a world scale, this has meant in the 11 years between 1971 and 1982, a 14.1 per cent rise in industrial employment. It is true that in this period "developed market economies" (North America and Western Europe in particular) experienced an industrial employment decline of 6 1/2 per cent. But "developing market economies" shot up by 58 per cent, and "centrally planned economies" by 16 per cent to more than make up the difference. . . . On a world scale there are more industrial workers than at any time in history. (qtd. in Callinicos 125)

Rather than a global world-view, postmodernism--with its defining assertion that the world has entered a postindustrial age--is a class-and region-specific phenomenon. For all its denouncing of totalization and championing of the local and the heterogenous, postmodernism can be read as a form of cultural imperialism that alleges global significance for a bourgeois, primarily Western intellectual conceit.

Similarly, postmodern Vietnam War literature is strikingly ethnocentric. Although one of postmodernism's defining characteristics, according to Aronowitz and Gi-



roux, is "its celebration of plurality and the politics of racial, gender, and ethnic difference" (61), it is precisely the postmodern elements of The Things They Carried that contributes to its solipsism. O'Brien's preoccupation with the reconstructive power of the imagination, his problematizing of unequivocal truth and a knowable reality, rather than leading to a more expansive vision and a more considered portrait of the Vietnamese, leads to a concentration on "Tim trying to save Timmy's life." In attempting to challenge the concept of an autonomous subject, O'Brien writes a text that is obsessed with self; he details the uncertain effects of an unreal war upon an unknowable self but fails to examine its all too real effects upon the Vietnamese. As Philip H. Melling asserts, and as is buttressed by The Things They Carried, postmodernists "have become fascinated with Vietnam as a place redolent with the modes of modern experience . . . at the expense of its moral or social contexts" (119). For postmodernists,

what the American experience in Vietnam reveals . . . is a level of sophistication and enterprise that is far more intriguing and relevant to the world in which we live than the primitive ideology of an aspiring third world country, or the social catastrophe that Vietnam has experienced in recent times. (Melling 119)

Instead of celebrating difference, a postmodern text like The Things They Carried, with its literary and epistemo-

logical preoccupations, is uninterested in the wartime experience of the Vietnamese.

There continues to be an urgent need to correct this omission due to the thoroughness with which the history of American militarism in southeast Asia has been repressed and revised in the last two decades to promote a militarist, nationalist, and capitalist ideology. After a war or period of social crisis, history frequently is reinterpreted and radical moments excised from a nation's cultural memory. It is in the interest of ruling elites, after all, to deny the efficacy of and if possible even the existence of large-scale oppositional social movements and to revise troubling historical fact. Those with access to the means of cultural production (book publishers, film companies, media conglomerates, etc.) are significant forces behind such revision, promoting, in the words of Michael Klein, "a process of organized forgetting [that] takes people's complex past away, substituting comfortable myths that reinforce rather than challenge the status quo" (19).

What has been most revised in the recent historical record is how horribly destructive the war was for the Vietnamese. Even "On the rare occasions when the devastating consequences of the war are noted," write Chomsky and Herman, "care is taken to sanitize the reports so as to eliminate the U.S. role" (83). Part of this role be-

tween 1965 and 1969 was to unleash 4.5 million tons of aerial bombardment upon Indochina--about nine times the tonnage dropped in the Pacific during World War II (including Hiroshima and Nagasaki). According to Herman, this amounted to "over 70 tons of bombs for every square mile of Vietnam, North and South " (qtd. in Chomsky 1969, 291). By the end of the war, the U.S. had dropped 7 million tons of bombs on Vietnam--more than twice the tonnage dropped on Europe and Asia during the second world war, or almost one 500 pound bomb for every Vietnamese (Zinn 469). Marilyn Young summarizes the consequences of the American war against Vietnam:

in the South, 9,000 out of 15,000 hamlets, 25 million acres of farmland, 12 million acres of forest were destroyed, and 1.5 million farm animals had been killed; there were an estimated 200,000 prostitutes, 879,000 orphans, 181,000 disabled people, and 1 million widows; all six of the industrial cities in the North had been badly damaged, as were provincial and district towns, and 4,000 of 5,800 agricultural communes. North and south the land was cratered and planted with tons of unexploded ordnance, so that long after the war farmers and their families suffered serious injuries as they attempted to bring the fields back into cultivation. Nineteen million gallons of herbicide had been sprayed on the South during the war. (301-02)6

While many Americans can give a rough estimate of U.S. casualties, they consistently underestimate Vietnamese casualties. In a study conducted by the University of Massachusetts in 1992, Americans on average estimated 100,000 Vietnamese deaths, missing the true figure by only

1,900,000 (Chomsky 1993, 280). Even more remarkable, when I taught Vietnam War literature to undergraduates, some of my students were surprised to learn not that 40 times as many Vietnamese as Americans died but that Vietnamese deaths outnumbered Americans at all. Such ignorance of the lethal consequences of U.S. militarism is due to a process of historical revision that has been ongoing since the end of the War. With its lack of interest in the plight of the Vietnamese, a novel such as The Things They Carried has in its small way furthered this process of forgetting.

O'Brien moves beyond the world view of an American soldier once--in "The Man I Killed." Here he invents the biography of a slain Vietcong, imagining this soldier's rural upbringing, his interest in mathematics, his love affair with a university classmate, etc. This story stands out, not only in The Things They Carried but in Vietnam War novels generally, for its attempt to humanize an enemy soldier. O'Brien is particularly effective in revealing Americans' disregard for the lives of the Vietnamese by juxtaposing this soldier's life with the insensitive comments of American soldiers:

He wanted someday to be a teacher of mathematics. At night, lying on his mat, he could not picture himself doing the brave things his father had done, or his uncles, or the heroes of the stories. He hoped in his heart that he would never be tested. He hoped

the Americans would go away. Soon, he hoped. He kept hoping and hoping, always even when he was asleep.

"Oh, man, you fuckin' trashed the fucker," Azar said. "You scrambled his sorry self, look at that, you did, you laid him out like Shredded fuckin' Wheat. (140)

Yet the reconstruction of this soldier's life is consistently undercut by O'Brien's acknowledgment that it is all speculation: this Vietcong soldier was "a scholar, maybe. . . . He had been born, maybe, in 1946 in the village of My Khe" (139). All that is certain is that this soldier is dead. Although we are told of his life and family, we are simultaneously told that these details are fiction. O'Brien thus demonstrates that his true concern is not with the lives of the Vietnamese but with what such fanciful reconstructions reveal about the imaginative process.

Ultimately, this dead Vietcong soldier has no purpose and no existence beyond his literary expropriation by O'Brien. Even his death, which initially is alleged to have been caused by O'Brien, becomes grounds for speculating about the nature of truth: "I did not kill him," he writes,

but I was present, you see, and my presence was guilt enough. . . . I remember feeling the burden of responsibility and grief. I blamed myself. And rightly so, because I was present. But listen. Even that story is made up (203).

Rather than providing him with a means to celebrate ethnic difference, then, O'Brien's postmodernism causes him to turn inward, to use the death of a Vietcong soldier as the basis for a questioning of empiricism and a celebration of the reconstructive power of the imagination. Instead of using this death to consider the massive suffering inflicted by the U.S. military in pursuit of American foreign policy aims, O'Brien uses it as a springboard to further discussion of philosophical and aesthetic matters.

Nowhere else does O'Brien individualize the Vietnamese, except for a very brief description of "an old pappasan [who] guide[ed] [them] through the mine fields" (36) and a girl who, amidst the rubble of her village, "danced with her eyes half closed, her feet bare" (153). This girl is the only living, individualized Vietnamese in The Things They Carried affected by the war. Her dance exemplifies the hysteria caused by war (her family has been burned to death). Her dance also suggests to O'Brien and his comrades the inexplicable character of the Vietnamese--as one soldier explains, this dance is "Probably some weird ritual" (154).

Otherwise, there are only the faceless Vietnamese O'Brien's platoon encounters in the course of their combat missions. They search villages, "frisking children and old men" (15), watch "a dozen old mama-sans [run] out and start . . . yelling" (164), and dig foxholes next to a

pagoda whose "monks did not seem upset or displeased" (133). Impersonal descriptions like these, broad strokes meant to suggest village life and to convey a sense of rural Vietnam, constitute the limits of O'Brien's investigation of Vietnamese culture. As Frances Fitzgerald makes clear, though, the village is central to a peasant population who

lived in a society of particular people, all of whom knew each other by their place in the landscape. "Citizenship" in a Vietnamese village was personal and untransferable. In the past, few Vietnamese ever left their village in times of peace, for to do so was to leave society itself--all human attachments, all absolute rights and duties. (13)

According to Fitzgerald, for the rural Vietnamese self-identity was inseparable from identification with one's village. Yet in The Things They Carried O'Brien seems unaware of the importance of this communal existence; the villages encountered by his platoon are homogenous and their inhabitants generic.

The Vietnamese in The Things They Carried belong to one of several categories. They are KIAs, "twenty-seven bodies altogether, and parts of several others. . . . all badly bloated. Their clothing was stretched tight like sausage skins" (270-71) or an individual corpse, "an old man who lay face-up near a pigpen at the center of the village. His right arm was gone. At his face there were

already many flies and gnats" (256). They are human remains, "Stacks of bones--all kinds" with a poster proclaiming, "ASSEMBLE YOUR OWN GOOK!! FREE SAMPLE KIT!!" (119). They are ghosts "wiping out a whole Marine platoon in twenty seconds flat. Ghosts rising from the dead. Ghosts behind you and in front of you and inside of you" (231), "odd shapes swaying in the paddies, boogie-men in sandals, spirits dancing in old pagodas" (229). They are part of the countryside, "blend[ing] with the land, changing form, becoming trees and grass" (229). And the land itself is "some kind of soft black protoplasm, Vietnam, the blood and the flesh" (249).

These descriptions convey something of the war's carnage, and they accurately present American soldiers' fear and wonder at the skills of experienced guerilla fighters. But these descriptions also repeat the dehumanizing and at times racist attitudes of American soldiers. Although O'Brien is clearly critical of these attitudes, his novel, because it has no normative contrast other than the one story "The Man I Killed," does little to correct these views, to humanize the generic and naturalized descriptions of the Vietnamese so common in American novels of the war.

In The Things They Carried the Vietnamese exist primarily as a backdrop for what is truly important to O'Brien--to explore how the imaginative reconstruction and re-



consideration of trauma serves as the wellspring for literary creation. What O'Brien acknowledged about Going after Cacciato is true for The Things They Carried:

I don't see it as a book about war. . . . In part it's a book about writing a book. . . . when I talk about imagination and memory, I'm talking about the two key ingredients that go into writing fiction.  
(qtd. in Schroeder 134-35)

O'Brien's postmodern aesthetic leads him to concentrate on his own literary imagination. Ironically, considering the multicultural sympathies alleged of postmodernism, his inability to convey anything specific and human about the Vietnamese repeats the cultural ignorance and ethnocentrism that dominated the attitudes of American military leaders and policy-makers and that has so narrowly defined American cultural memory of the war. O'Brien's interest in personal trauma and the individual's ability to organize experience into meaningful narrative results in a text that is solipsistic and culturally exclusive. The "they" of the book's title does not include the Vietnamese.

#### Ahistoricism

As a representative postmodern text, The Things They Carried reveals the constraints that postmodern epistemology and its concomitant literary expression can impose

upon the presentation of historical fact. For example, in the story "On the Rainy River" O'Brien asks,

Was it a civil war? A war of national liberation or simple aggression? Who started it, and when, and why? What really happened to the USS Maddox on that dark night in the Gulf of Tonkin? Was Ho Chi Minh a Communist stooge, or a nationalist savior, or both, or neither? What about the Geneva accords? What about SEATO and the Cold War? What about dominoes?  
(44)

In the context of "On the Rainy River" these questions demonstrate the confusion about the war that existed circa 1968. If The Things They Carried is any evidence, though, O'Brien is not much closer to answering these questions twenty years later. This indeterminacy is characteristic of much analysis of the Vietnam War. Timothy Lomperis, for instance, asserts that "with the facts of Vietnam in such a flux . . . eventually everyone will be wrong," and "the facts, in Vietnam, make liars of us all" (59). Consequently, the only way O'Brien can address the geopolitical and historical issues raised by the war is to ask a series of rhetorical questions. The rapid-fire succession of these questions is meant to demonstrate the impossibility of ever explaining the war's history. Answers to questions such as these require facts that are knowable, history that is objective, and truths that are verifiable--all of which are brought into question by postmodernism. Postmodernists object to Marxist historicism in

particular because it allegedly imposes a totalizing framework and ignores the discursiveness of historical knowledge.

Rather than examine the Vietnam War through an explanatory framework such as class analysis, postmodernists see such explanations as totalizing and reductionist constructs. Thus Paul Patton criticizes Marxism because it displays

a refusal to accept the possibility of difference and discontinuity at the heart of human history, and a corresponding refusal to allow that there can be irreducibly different perspectives, each in its own way critical of existing social reality (qtd. in Callinicos 84-85).

Postmodernists write of the need to counter totality with heterogeneity and fragmentation, believing that other approaches merely replace one exclusive, elitist, hierarchical scheme with another. Rejecting the Enlightenment belief in universal truths and individual reason, postmodernists regard themselves as, in Christopher Norris's description, "strategists engaged in producing various sorts of discourse, from various (often contradictory) subject-positions, without any claim to ultimate authority or truth" (105).

Yet if O'Brien's questions are to be taken seriously, we must have an explanatory framework that can choose between competing truth claims; specifically, we must have

some way of accounting for U.S. foreign policy during the cold war. We must be able first to recognize and second to explain the consistency with which the U.S. has thwarted political movements and overturned governments that did not endorse the interests of capital (as these interests were conceived of by corporate and policy elites). Or as Michael Parenti asks,

Why has the U.S. government never supported social revolutionary forces against right-wing governments? Could it possibly do so? If not, why not? Why in the post-war era has the U.S. overthrown a dozen or more popularly elected left-reformist democracies? Why has it fostered close relations with just about all the right-wing autocracies on earth? (qtd. in Meyerson 68)

The most logical and consistent explanation for this history is that the U.S. has pursued a policy based on the interests of global capital. Class analysis, therefore, is a vital tool for understanding the motivation behind U.S. foreign policy. However, this analysis requires the kind of totalizing scheme that Hutcheon declares (with un-postmodern certainty) "postmodernism cannot and will not offer" (214).<sup>11 7</sup>

This postmodern opposition to totality stems from, in Brenda K. Marshall's words, a "recognition that there is no 'outside' from which to 'objectively' name the present," a recognition that in turn stems from "an awareness of being-within, first, a language, and second, a particu-

lar historical, social, cultural framework" (3). As Terry Eagleton suggests, for poststructuralists

There is no concept which is not embroiled in an open-ended play of signification, shot through with the traces and fragments of other ideas. It is just that, out of this play of signifiers, certain meanings are elevated by social ideologies to a privileged position, or made the centres around which other meanings are forced to turn. (Literary 131)

In other words, all political positions, all historical analyses are discursive; there is no place outside of language from which a critique may be made--no discourse can adequately represent reality since reality is constituted by discourse. As Paul de Man argues, "the bases for historical knowledge are not empirical facts but written texts, even if these texts masquerade in the guise of wars or revolutions" (qtd. in Leonard 416). Or as Eagleton explains,

Our language does not so much reflect reality as signify it, carve it into conceptual shape. The answer, then, to what exactly is being carved into conceptual shape is impossible to give. (Ideology 203)

If reality is problematized because it is constituted by discourse, then O'Brien's questions can never be answered truthfully. For a true answer, according to the logic of poststructuralism, has merely been elevated to the status of truth by social convention and the dominant structures of power. As O'Brien explains,

by going through the process of having imagined something, one gathers a sense of the stuff that's being imagined. . . . And that sense can't be pinned down to a message or a moral. (qtd. in Schroeder 140)

Ideology critique, on the other hand, rests on the assumption that, however problematic and discursive, history is knowable and truth verifiable. Ideology critique has two main goals--first to identify human suffering and social injustice and second to explain what causes these to be reproduced consistently and on a large-scale. Ideology critique, then, is based on the notion that some explanations are better (because truer). Postmodernists object to ideology critique for precisely this reason--because it presupposes an objective and authoritative position from which the truthfulness of discourses may be ascertained. For postmodernists all critique, because it is enmeshed in a web of signifiers, is implicated in the system it critiques. Since there is no position outside discourse, and since discourse is determined by social ideologies, there is no position that is not always already ideological.

The notion, therefore, that dominant ideologies prevail by hoodwinking the masses, by perpetuating a "false consciousness" about the true nature of social relations, is a particular object of scorn for postmodernists.<sup>8</sup> Eagleton summarizes postmodernist objections to the concept of false consciousness:

the assumption that some of our ideas "match" or "correspond to" the way things are, while others do not, is felt by some to be a naive, discreditable theory of knowledge. For another thing, the idea of false consciousness can be taken as implying the possibility of some unequivocally correct way of viewing the world. . . . Moreover, the belief that a minority of theorists monopolize a scientifically grounded knowledge of how society is, while the rest of us blunder around in some fog of false consciousness, does not particularly endear itself to the democratic sensibility. (Ideology 10-11)

There is little question about the intent of ideological critique--its goal is to oppose false consciousness by uncovering truths about social relations that are disguised by prevailing ideological codes and myths. As Chomsky has argued, it is the responsibility of intellectuals "to seek the truth lying hidden behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation, ideology, and class interest through which the events of current history are presented to us" (American 324).

In The Things They Carried O'Brien does not attempt to identify these hidden truths; instead, he suggests that truth is processive and paradoxical. He emphasizes the discursive construction of reality and focuses on how the individual consciousness is transformed through the literary imagination. Because of his postmodern sympathies O'Brien fails to consider the larger cultural and political dynamics of the Vietnam War. He has declared that he views literature "as a way of jarring people into paying attention to things--not just the war but your per-

sonal stake in the political world" (qtd. in Schroeder 146). And he has suggested that his work "has been somewhat political in that it's directed at big issues" (qtd. in Schroeder 145). Unfortunately, these "big issues" do not include American imperialism, the slaughter of the Vietnamese people, the poisoning and deforestation of the Vietnamese landscape, or the continuing deprivation wrought by America's twenty year trade embargo; instead, O'Brien says his "concerns have to do with abstractions: what's courage and how do you get it? What's justice and how do you achieve it? How does one do right in an evil situation?" (qtd. in Schroeder 137). At times he criticizes Americans' ignorance of and indifference toward Vietnam, writing that

they didn't know Bao Dai from the man in the moon. They didn't know history. They didn't know the first thing about Diem's tyranny, or the nature of Vietnamese nationalism, or the long colonialism of the French. (49)

Unfortunately, there is nothing in The Things They Carried to correct this ignorance. By concentrating on what he directly experienced, O'Brien fails to examine the history of American involvement in Vietnam. Without this broader understanding, he cannot explain the killings he both witnessed and took part in. Kiowa's death, for example, prompts him to write that "when a man died, there had to



be blame. . . . You could blame the war. You could blame the idiots who made the war. You could blame Kiowa for going to it" (198). O'Brien continues,

You could blame the enemy. You could blame the mortar rounds. You could blame people who were too lazy to read a newspaper, who were bored by the daily body counts, who switched channels at the mention of politics. You could blame whole nations. You could blame God. You could blame the munitions makers or Karl Marx or a trick of fate or an old man in Omaha who forgot to vote. (198-99)

Ultimately, the only certain cause of Kiowa's death, according to O'Brien, is its direct cause: "In the field . . . the causes were immediate. A moment of carelessness or bad judgment or plain stupidity" (199). Yet some causes are more proximate and explanatory than others. Robert McNamara is more responsible for deaths in Vietnam than an old man in Omaha who forgets to vote. The board of directors of Dow Chemical are more blameworthy than people who switched channels at the mention of politics. O'Brien cannot make such seemingly obvious distinctions because he has accepted the postmodern view that structures and hierarchies are in and of themselves tyrannical, what Lyotard warns is "a return of terror . . . the realization of the fantasy to seize reality" (Condition 82). For O'Brien, since history is complex and ambiguous and exists only within the process of remembering, it is always selectively constructed and revised.

While I believe that the details of historical experience to some degree are constructed and revised by individual memory, the broad outlines and important facts of this history are not. The revision of this larger history is due not to individual whim but to a political/cultural process. Facts that may challenge myths and ideologies useful for maintaining existing power relations are under constant pressure to be revised or forgotten. At a time when the Vietnam War has been reconstructed as a lesson in patriotism and Vietnamese cruelty,<sup>9</sup> there remains more than ever a need for its accurate historical rendering.<sup>10</sup> Popular memory of the Vietnam War has been shaped to erase a history that might otherwise challenge belief in the benign nature of U.S. foreign policy and might reveal the radical potential of mass social movements.<sup>11</sup> Herman and Chomsky explain how, in the wake of the Vietnam War, government, corporate, and media elites in the U.S. were faced with the need to overcome

the dread "Vietnam syndrome." . . . This was part of a larger problem, the "crisis of democracy" perceived by Western elites as the normally passive general population threatened to participate in the political system, challenging established privilege and power. A further task was to prevent recovery in the societies ravaged by the American assault, so that the partial victory already achieved by their destruction could be sustained. (236-37)

O'Brien cannot promote the historical accuracy needed to counter this revisionism because prevailing modes of lit-

erary evaluation discount such historicism and because, according to the tenets of postmodernism, belief in historical accuracy is not merely impossible but tyrannical.

Despite its frequent criticism of the absurdity and inhumanity of the Vietnam War, then, The Things They Carried does not significantly challenge prevailing ideological myths about the war. O'Brien's preoccupation with the ways experience is structured and given meaning by the imagination and his refusal to consider the larger issues raised by the war are due to his acceptance of a postmodern epistemology, as well as a belief that because historical fact is always discursive, it is never fully knowable. His solution to postmodernism's problematizing of a knowable reality and an individual subject is to see both the real and the self as provisional and processive. In other words, while there is no certain reality because it is forever mediated, this mediation, for O'Brien, is real. "The life of the imagination," he says, "is real--it's as fucking real as anything else" (142). Thus in The Things They Carried O'Brien intends to write true war stories but does not contextualize his experience, does not provide us with any deeper understanding of the causes and consequences of this war, does not see beyond his individual experience to document the vastly greater suffering of the Vietnamese, and does little to counter the view that the war was an American tragedy.

## Notes

1. From Les Vrais et les Faux Secrets du Pentagone (qtd. in Burchett 60); The Things They Carried 104.

2. The term "postmodernist," which I use throughout this chapter, is somewhat misleading since it alleges a unified body of thought and does not recognize the sometimes significant divergence of opinion among contemporary critical theorists. However, since these theorists draw upon several central conceits and broadly concur in their opposition to totality and their recognition of the primacy of discourse, my reference to "postmodernists" does convey the main premises which undergird postmodernism and which link writers as different as Jameson and Lyotard.

3. Ironically, realist fiction is thought incapable of conveying the reality of the Vietnam War. According to Klinkowitz, the realism of Bobbie Ann Mason and Jayne Anne Phillips (in In Country and Machine Dreams respectively) misrepresents the war by implying that "Vietnam was really like any other war in the literary canon from the Iliad through War and Peace" (156). Likewise, Philip Beidler faults James Webb's A Country Such as This for "working literarily against the tendencies of Vietnam fiction as a rapidly evolving post-modern genre" (74). Ringnalda goes so far as to suggest that no "narrative [can] ultimately connect the reader . . . to the Vietnam War" (69).

4. It is interesting to note the similarity between O'Brien's view that narrative can stitch past and present

to make whole his fragmented self, with Jameson's notion that postmodernism is marked by "schizophrenic writing." According to Jameson,

when the links of the signifying chain snap, then we have schizophrenia in the form of a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers. The connection between this kind of linguistic malfunction and the psyche of the schizophrenic may then be grasped by way of a twofold proposition: first, that personal identity is itself the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with one's present; and, second, that such active temporal unification is itself a function of language, or better still of the sentence. . . . With the breakdown of the signifying chain, therefore, the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time. (26-27)

5. For Jameson, "the economic preparation of postmodernism . . . began in the 1950s. . . . [but] the psychic habitus of the new age . . . [was] achieved more properly in the 1960s" (xx). Hal Foster asserts, "The crisis of modernity was felt radically in the late 1950s and early '60s, the moment often cited as the postmodernist break" (xiii). Madan Sarup notes, "The concept of postmodernism. . . . seems to be connected with the appearance, between the 1950s and the 1960s, of a new social and economic order" (131). And while placing the emergence of a full-blown postmodernism between 1968 and 1972, David Harvey identifies its roots in "the anti-modern movement of the 1960s" (38).

6. Herman and Chomsky cite nearly identical statistics:

In the South, 9,000 out of 15,000 hamlets were damaged or destroyed, along with some twenty-five million acres of farmland and twelve million acres of forest. One-and-a-half million cattle were killed, and the war left a million widows and some 800,000 orphans. In the North, all six industrial cities were damaged (three razed to the ground) along with twenty-eight of thirty provincial towns (twelve completely destroyed), ninety-six of 116 district towns, and 4,000 of some 5,800 communes. Four hundred thousand cattle were killed and over a million acres of farmland damaged. Much of the land is a moonscape, where people live on the edge of famine, with rice rations lower than those in Bangladesh. (239)

7. Underlying the postmodern critique of Marxist historicism is a radically skeptical and anti-foundational epistemology. In presenting evidence to counter postmodern indeterminacy I do not rely on a postivist epistemology. Instead, my understanding of historical explanation is derived from a sophisticated realism of the kind offered by Richard Miller. For Miller,

A hypothesis is confirmed if there is a good argument for an account of why the data are as they are that entails the approximate truth of the hypothesis as against the basic falsehood of its rivals. (emphasis added, 295)

For detailed explanations of this realist epistemology see Miller, Analyzing Marx (especially pp. 221-313) and Gregory Meyerson, "Deconstruction, Moral Realism and Emancipation."

8. To oppose postmodernism's anti-elitist rhetoric by positing a notion of false consciousness, is to reproduce the very non-egalitarian social relations and exclusionary discourse that postmodernism seeks to overturn. Belief in expert knowledge and a privileged access to the truth, in this light, can be connected to Stalinist terror. Thus Aronowitz and Giroux call for an "attack on those intellectuals who would designate themselves the emancipatory vanguard, an intellectual elite who have deemed themselves above history" (68-69). Likewise, James Scott sees "the notion of ideological consent from below" as comforting to "the Leninist left" since "it offers a role for the vanguard party and its intelligentsia, who must lift the scales from the eyes of the oppressed" (86, note 39). Ideological critique is also thought irrelevant because capitalism is so all encompassing that "even if there were a bona fide, certified-authentic vanguard out there, who's to say," asks Michael Berube, "that its cultural work would be more important than--or even distinguishable from--the kinds of stuff we find in what we still call 'mainstream media'?" (121). Or as Kirk Vardenoe and Adam Gopnik write,

in the age of Joe Isuzu, a hardened knowingness about the value-emptied amorality of media culture was, far from being the preserve of a small cadre of vanguard thinkers, the sour, commonplace cynicism of the whole commercial culture (qtd. in Berube, Public Access 121).

Lyotard deconstructs the very notion of ideological critique, suggesting that those critics who seek to identify the truth are the real victims of false consciousness.

Those who perpetuate the promise of emancipation

in ways other than a minimal resistance to every totalitarianism, who have been imprudent enough to nominate the just cause in conflicts between ideas or powers--the likes of Chomsky, Negri, Sartre, Foucault-- have been tragically deceived. (Explained 96)

9. Perhaps the most prominent reconstruction of the war is seen in the belief that the Vietnamese continue to hold Americans captive. H. Bruce Franklin has shown how this national obsession with POWs and MIAs initially was constructed by the Nixon administration in 1970 "to continue the war for four years. . . . It was both a booby trap for the anti-war movement and a wrench to be thrown into the works of the Paris peace talks" (74). Franklin goes on to show how the MIA myth was perpetuated by the right to further its political agenda. So skillfully was this issue exploited that, according to Franklin,

by the end of [1970] . . . the Steve Canyon cartoon strip was featuring POW/MIA relatives in its daily sagas, ABC had presented a POW/MIA special, President Nixon had changed the name of Veterans Day to Prisoner of War Day, the Ladies' Home Journal had published an article with a tear-out letter for readers to mail, and the U.S. Post Office . . . had issued 135 million POW/ MIA postage stamps. (54).



As was demonstrated by recent news accounts of a Russian translation of a Vietnamese document alleging a secret prison system holding hundreds of Americans, the POW/ MIA myth continues unabated.

10. Consider too that in their 1979 examination of the portrayal of the Vietnam War in history textbooks, William L. Griffin and John Marciano conclude that these texts

exclude, even as a valid thesis for examination, the position that the conflict was a logical extension of imperialist policies that first brought the United States to China, to the Philippines and Korea; that our efforts in Vietnam were simply a continuation of earlier French colonialism. . . . [and] nowhere is it suggested that the Vietnamese who fought against the United States were principled and dedicated. (170-71)

According to Griffin and Marciano, these textbooks discussed the Vietnam War "without calling into question a single fundamental premise surrounding the conflict" (171).

11. For a discussion of the success of one mass social movement--the anti-war movement--see Zinn, A People's History of the United States, Chapter 18.

### Conclusion

The Americans destroyed our land. Every family has loved ones who were killed and every family suffered big losses in the war. With all the American soldiers did to the Vietnamese people, how can we not hate them? They bombed so much. Even now people get killed from unexploded bombs. . . . People still suffer from the toxic chemicals the Americans dropped. Babies are born deformed. And they left children, the Amerasians. . . . We don't like to remember the war, but sometimes we sit down like this, and we remember very clearly.

--Nguyen Than Khiem, 1993

We have finally kicked the Vietnam syndrome.

--George Bush, 19901

Few recent cultural myths have had as little evidentiary support and yet been so persistently believed as the notion that the Vietnamese government holds American servicemen secretly captive.<sup>2</sup> In part this myth has persisted because it has been promoted by the commercial culture. Several successful Hollywood features--Rambo, Missing in Action, and Uncommon Valor--centered around attempts to rescue long-suffering American prisoners of war. Less well known are the series of popular novels written about this myth, notably Jack Buchanan's M.I.A. Hunter, Eric Helm's Vietnam: Ground Zero, and J.C. Pollock's Mission M.I.A. The latter opens with an introduction by General John Singlaub asserting that "It is a shocking and

tragic fact that today more than 2,490 American servicemen remain unaccounted for from the Vietnam War."3

Singlaub goes on to declare that Vietnamese refugees, in "scores of eyewitness accounts," have spoken of "groups of emaciated Americans, some in chains, being led under heavy guard along jungle trails or through villages to unknown destinations" (9). Likewise, a national mailing campaign circa 1983 (available on audiotape narrated by Charlton Heston) declared that,

Starved and clad only in filthy rags, American soldiers and airmen are kept chained in tiny bamboo cages . . . made to work like animals pulling heavy plows . . . forced to toil from daybreak to nightfall in steaming jungle heat. (qtd. in Franklin 121)

Whereas during the war it was opponents of the South Vietnamese government who on Con Son Island were confined in tiger cages, "usually bolted to the floor, handcuffed to a bar or rod, or put in leg irons" (Emerson 344), now it is Americans who are imprisoned and chained.<sup>4</sup> And whereas a U.S. policy of forced urbanization, deforestation, and massive air attacks resulted in, according to William S. Turley, "a near famine condition among the poor" in post-war Vietnam (qtd. in Chomsky and Herman 96) and led to desperate attempts by the Vietnamese to revitalize their nation's agricultural base, in the POW/MIA myth it is American servicemen who continue to toil in the rice pad-

dies and jungles of Vietnam. The POW/MIA myth, then, functions as ideology, inverting reality and transforming victimizers into victims. Domestically, it has served to obscure the destructive legacy of U.S. militarism in Indochina, transforming America's brutal war against a third-world national liberation movement into a nefarious Oriental plot to enslave Americans. The actual situation in Vietnam, with under-fed and ill-housed peasants attempting to reconstruct a society devastated by U.S. militarism and punished by a U.S. trade embargo, becomes a mythic tableau where emaciated Americans are enslaved by sadistic Oriental overseers.

This myth has been used to hinder normalization of relations with and thereby further punish Vietnam. The tragic absurdity of this situation is documented by Neil Sheehan, who explains that by 1992 the U.S. was spending a hundred million dollars a year on POW/MIA efforts. Sheehan rightly declares it bizarre and "perhaps even morally obscene" for the U.S.

to spend so much money searching for bones in a country where children die for want of antibiotics, and thousands of amputees from the war . . . hobble on crutches or go armless, because they cannot afford prosthetic devices. United States aid to Vietnam for prosthetic devices in fiscal 1991 was a million dollars--less than the cost of retrieving a single remains. (46)

As widespread as this myth is within popular culture, though, it is absent from "serious" literature about the war. Rather than promoting a myth of continuing Asian cruelty, this literature criticizes American military policy and the atrocities committed by U.S. troops. But in so doing it too concentrates on American suffering. As Peter Marin notes, American authors have been unwilling "to confront directly the realities of the war, or to have considered it at least in part from the Vietnamese point of view . . . in terms of their suffering rather than ours" (qtd. in Martin 10-11). In its erasure of the Vietnamese and its emphasis on American suffering even critically acclaimed Vietnam War literature reinforces the notion that American veterans--indeed, all of American culture--remains imprisoned by the war.

This concentration on the Americanness of the Vietnam War, relying as it does on the individual experiences of GIs, fails to consider significant historical and geopolitical issues. Vietnam War novels do not often attempt to explain the war in terms of imperialism and class exploitation. And if anti-communism is raised in these novels it is merely to show the ludicrousness of establishment rationales for the war, rather than to demonstrate how consistently the U.S. has opposed anti-capitalist liberation movements. In failing to address these issues, Vietnam War authors leave much of the war and the

suffering it caused unexplained. As James C. Wilson notes,

American officials did their best to deny history . . . and the news media simply ignored it. Similarly, very few Vietnam writers make use of this historical "key" in their efforts to unlock the meaning of Vietnam. (54)

No wonder, then, that the conspiracies asserted by the likes of Buchanan, Pollock, Helm, and Singlaub have gained wide acceptance.<sup>5</sup> Concentrating on two critically praised works (Philip Caputo's autobiographical narrative A Rumor of War and Bobbie Ann Mason's minimalist postwar novel In Country), I will show what is underemphasized and often missing from American literary accounts of the war--a recognition of the large-scale suffering of the Vietnamese and an understanding that the war was part of a systematic effort by the U.S. to counter anti-capitalist social movements. With such viewpoints omitted and with an emphasis on the plight of American veterans, even acclaimed texts like these contribute to a revisionist climate in which movies like Rambo and books like M.I.A. Hunter flourish, a climate in which the war can be read as an exercise in ongoing American suffering.

#### The War Within

In A Rumor of War Caputo is more concerned with the plight of the Vietnamese than is O'Brien in The Things

They Carried. Caputo alludes to the long legacy of war in Vietnam, describing how "legions of maimed soldiers," Vietnamese combat veterans, "a man missing an arm or a leg or an eye, some forgotten victim of some forgotten battle, would hobble up holding out a faded fatigue cap" (131). Caputo also points to the desperate poverty in which many Vietnamese live. An old woman is described as "a sack of bones covered by a thin layer of shriveled flesh" (85); children "have distended bellies and ulcerous skin" (101); a young woman nurses "an infant whose head was covered with running sores" (83). Caputo shows the social destruction caused by the American presence, from huts "built entirely of flattened beer cans" to children with "decades of wisdom in their eyes and four-letter words on their lips" (101) to an old farmer selling "photos of Vietnamese whores and American soldiers making love in various positions" (227).

As in most Vietnam War narratives, the Vietnamese we learn the most about are prostitutes. Even before arriving in Vietnam, Caputo reads "that sixty prostitutes had migrated from Saigon to Danang 'in anticipation of a rumored landing of U.S. Marines'" (37). In his subsequent descriptions of these women, Caputo occasionally approaches the exoticizing of Greene, describing a Chinese bargirl (with "ao-dai . . . folded neatly on a chair") as "a beautiful girl, more full-figured than a Vietnamese,

but with the same long, straight black hair" (136). And he writes of "A group of young girls [who] glided by, provocative creatures in their silk trousers and filmy aodais" (51). Generally, though, his descriptions are not filtered through an exotic lens but through a plain prose that conveys the harsh reality of prostitution in Vietnam. His description of a brothel is far removed from Greene's luxurious "House of Five Hundred Women." Caputo tells of

a large stifling room with a dirt-encrusted floor; half-naked whores lounging on straw beds and languidly waving wicker fans at the clouds of flies that buzzed around their heads. (134)

Rather than the alluring Asian beauties Greene writes of, Caputo points to "a bony creature of indeterminable age [who] lay on her back, staring at the ceiling with opium-glazed eyes" (134) and another woman whose "mouth was a smear of lipstick . . . red circles were painted on her cheeks" (134). There is little of Phuong or of "provocative creatures" in white silk trousers here.

But Caputo's main concern in A Rumor of War, like most veteran-authors, is his own wartime experience. The Vietnamese function as a backdrop against which his autobiographical narrative unfolds. Since he seeks to convey his own experience of the war--and since like most American soldiers his encounters with Vietnamese were fleeting--Caputo does not have a single, identifiable



Vietnamese character in his text, not even as stereotyped a character as Phuong. Nor does Caputo do much to convey a sense of the lives and experiences of enemy soldiers. Instead, like O'Brien, he speaks of ghost soldiers. "We're fighting phantoms" (55), he writes, "a whole division of phantoms" (59), "phantoms [who] had pulled off another vanishing act" (89). The Viet Cong are "invisible friends" (86), "an invisible enemy" (xv), "a chimera" (95), "wraiths" (103), "djinnns" (139). Regardless of how accurately Caputo here may convey the mixture of awe and fear in which American soldiers viewed the Viet Cong, this conceit, in the course of a text that foregrounds the American perspective and marginalizes the Vietnamese, rewrites the actual history of the war. The experience of the Viet Cong, their own heroism and suffering and terror, is reduced to a spectral presence flitting in and out of the jungle.

In addition, like Phuong (who Greene compared to, among other things, a dog and a plant) the Viet Cong in A Rumor of War are mistaken for natural objects. To inexperienced American soldiers, "listening to things--men? animals? snakes?--crawling in the underbrush" (91), "bushes began to look like men" (54); the Viet Cong "evaporated like the morning jungle mists" (89); at times "it was as if the trees were shooting" (86). Indeed, it often is impossible to distinguish the Viet Cong from

jungle animals: "the Bengal tiger stalked and the cobra coiled beneath its rock and the Viet Cong lurked in ambush" (77). However accurately these descriptions may convey the perceptions of American soldiers, they still naturalize the Viet Cong; in so doing, a form of warfare necessitated by America's daunting technological superiority is transformed into a native skill.<sup>6</sup> The need of the Viet Cong to operate surreptitiously or else to be, in Caputo's words, "naked against the blast and splintering steel of one-hundred-pound shells" (110), is made into a natural advantage. As Wilson notes, Caputo's depiction of the Vietnamese--and, I would add, the depiction of Vietnamese by almost all Vietnam War novelists and memoir-writers--"fails to take into account that sense of the other on which morality depends" (63).<sup>7</sup> This erasure and naturalizing both ignores Vietnamese suffering and justifies it.

To justify his own role in the murder of two Vietnamese civilians, Caputo argues that the atrocities committed by American troops resulted from three bitter forms of warfare (civil war, jungle war, and revolution); from the stress of guerilla war; from "an overpowering greed for survival" (xvix); from General Westmoreland's strategy of attrition; and from "the conditions imposed by the climate and country" (xix).<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, despite his attempt to establish a complex causality for American atroc-

ities, Caputo frequently falls back on a belief straight out of Conrad, suggesting the atrocities committed by U.S. troops in Vietnam were due to an innate human evil that was liberated by the removal of civilizing prohibitions. As Andrew Martin explains, "What is eventually made clear" in A Rumor of War "is that the disintegration of American ideological and cultural assumptions in Vietnam could, and often did, produce savagery among what had once been 'good, solid kids'" (82-83). "Lacking restraints, sanctioned to kill, confronted by a hostile country and a relentless enemy," Caputo writes, "we sank into a brutish state" (xx).

But American soldiers are not initially violent or cruel. Far from it. They are gloriously innocent, "march[ing] into Vietnam, swaggering, confident, and full of idealism" (328). Since there is no analogous innocence among the Vietnamese (on the contrary, from teenaged prostitutes to war-weary children, the Vietnamese are far too experienced) and since innocence has so frequently been associated with the U.S., it is difficult not to read this as an inherently American quality. American soldiers, Caputo tells us, went to Vietnam "full of illusion" and with "a missionary idealism" (xiv), believing in "their ingrained American idealism" (129) that "whatever we did was right" (66).

Caputo's belief that "an arrogance tempered . . . American innocence" (128-29) mirrors Greene's criticism of

the mortal innocence of American foreign policy, as personified by Alden Pyle. Unexamined by both Greene and Caputo, however, is the notion that the intentions behind U.S. policy were benign. This American innocence suggests Vietnamese guilt, as Caputo makes clear when explaining how the Vietnamese had conducted "Twenty years of terrorism and fratricide [that] had obliterated most reference points from the country's moral map long before we arrived" (xviii). Caputo overlooks the integral role the U.S. played in this obliteration by supporting the French military effort and thwarting the Geneva Accords. Considering that the widespread popular support of the Viet Minh and the NLF caused the U.S. to prop up a series of unpopular and authoritarian South Vietnamese regimes (first through economic and military aid, then through the commitment of soldiers like Caputo), it is a gross distortion to view the conflict in Vietnam as a fratricidal war into which innocent Americans intervened.

Even though he repeatedly identifies American atrocities, describing, for instance, how "High explosive bombs blasted houses to fragments [and] napalm sucked air from lungs and turned human flesh to ashes" (4), and even though he declares such actions to be an integral part of U.S. policy, Caputo suggests these atrocities stem from an emotional and physical climate that exacerbates man's innate savagery. In this climate, American soldiers quickly

lose their innocence and recognize they are fighting "a war for survival waged in a wilderness without rules or laws," a war where they feel "only contempt for those who sought to impose on [their] savage struggle the mincing distinctions of civilized warfare" (217).

Like the Congo, the Vietnamese bush "was one of the last of the dark regions on earth" (105): "It was absolutely black. It was a void. . . . the source and center of all the darkness in the world" (225). This void "awakened something evil in us, some dark, malicious power that allowed us to kill without feeling" (309). Considering the similarity between such notions and Heart of Darkness, it is little wonder that Caputo and his men "hear drums beating in the distance. . . . a chilling sound that seemed the essence of all that was frightening and mysterious about the jungle" (124) or that against this dark power, "rockets and machine guns were merely technological equivalents of the gourds and rattles natives use to chase away evil spirits" (81).<sup>9</sup>

But even if one ignores the Conradian determinism in A Rumor of War, several problems persist in Caputo's argument that the atrocities committed by American soldiers were due to the nature of the war, to the climate and the country, to the absence of civilized restraints, to a policy of attrition, etc. While correct in placing blame on "the war in general and U.S. military policies in

particular" (313) (i.e., the "policies of free-fire zones, in which a soldier is permitted to shoot at any human target . . . and body counts" [310]), Caputo does not address what caused these particular policies. The atrocities committed by American soldiers, including the killings for which Caputo himself was responsible, are blamed upon a larger atrocity--the war itself--without an examination as to why the U.S. conducted the war so inhumanely. These policies, since they were conceived of and approved by military and political leaders far from the field, cannot be attributed to the climate or to the emotional stress of guerilla warfare. Why, then, did the U.S. implement a strategy of near genocide that included a systematic campaign of terror and assassination (the Phoenix Program)? the use of chemical defoliants, napalm, and white phosphorous? repeated bombings of civilian targets? free-fire zones and strategic hamlets and body counts?

Many arguments have been made to answer this question. Some find culpability in an American national character shaped by the dispossession and genocide of Native Americans.<sup>10</sup> Others argue it was racism that engendered such brutal policies toward Asians. Some fault male psycho-sexual development. And still others attribute U.S. policies to ignorance, incompetence, and political interference. I find three central explanations for the brutality of U.S. military policy in Vietnam. First, the

cold war military buildup demanded the use of advanced weaponry. The development of and expenditures for these weapons created a momentum that almost required their use and in turn created a demand for newer and even deadlier weapons. The destructiveness of U.S. military policy, therefore, was determined in part by the profitability of the war for American corporations. Second, because it was fighting an enemy for whom there was broad public support and upholding a government with which there was little public sympathy, the U.S. resorted to a policy based on terror. Unable to win hearts and minds, the U.S. had to terrorize them. Third, the inhumanity of U.S. military policy served as a warning to movements of social liberation and economic justice the world over. As Jean-Paul Sartre explains,

The Americans want to show others that guerilla war does not pay: they want to show all the oppressed and exploited nations that might be tempted to shake off the American yoke by launching a people's war. . . they want to show Latin America first of all, and more generally, all of the Third World. To Che Guevera who said, "We need several Vietnams," the American government answers, "They will all be crushed the way we are crushing the first." (540)

In A Rumor of War Caputo's central concern is with the cause of American atrocities. However, he spends little time addressing the large-scale destruction wrought by American military policy. Instead, he focuses on the

criminal acts of individual American soldiers, including himself. His failure to consider how this policy was shaped by the interests of capital and his focus on individual American suffering are consistent with the liberal critique of the war that has dominated Vietnam War literature and has helped erase the horror of the war from American cultural memory.

### The War at Home

In In Country Bobbie Ann Mason is concerned not so much with the war but with how it has been remembered and revised within American culture. Set in rural Hopewell, Kentucky in the summer of 1984 and focusing on 17-year-old Sam Hughes's attempt to understand a war that killed her father, Dwayne, and traumatized her Uncle Emmett, In Country does not consider the plight of the Vietnamese. But Mason does document the racist attitudes of American GIs. More than a decade after the war, one veteran still rails about those "sneaky . . . little bastards" who like "prairie dogs. . . . run around inside [their] tunnels" (135). And Sam learns from her father's diary what he thought of the Vietnamese--they were prey, like deer and rabbits, who could attack like panthers (203). Similarly, Sam imagines that to Emmett "the fleas [infesting his home] were the Vietnamese," which in turn makes her wonder how often she had "heard the enemy soldiers compared to ants, or other creatures too numerous to count" (209).<sup>11</sup>



This kind of racism serves an important function during war, dehumanization being the first step toward brutalization. To American soldiers, the Vietnamese were not human beings; they were gooks. As Lieutenant William Calley acknowledged, "We weren't in My lai to kill human beings really. We were there to kill ideology that is carried by--I don't know. Pawns. Blobs. Pieces of flesh" (qtd. in Drinnan 456). Corporal John Geymann explained how the Marine Corps facilitated this dehumanization by

passing out pictures of mutilated bodies, showing this is what we do to the gooks, this is what's fun to do with the gooks. When somebody asks, "Why do you do it to a gook, why do you do this to people?" your answer is, "So what, they're just gooks, they're not people. It doesn't make any difference what you do to them; they're not human." (qtd. in Vietnam Veterans 5)

Likewise, Dwayne repeatedly dehumanizes the Vietnamese, writing that "Dead gooks have a special stink" (203) and longing to create "gook puddin" (204). Dwayne is so inured to the deaths of Vietnamese that when viewing a corpse he becomes absorbed in the abstract facts of human anatomy. He is "interest[ed] to see the body parts broken down." Rather than recognizing this body as once a living human being, Dwayne declares, "It had a special stink" (emphasis added, 203).

Mason does not discuss how the military establishment encouraged racism toward the Vietnamese. She does, how-

ever, suggest that these attitudes grew out of a culture where racism was common. Dwayne writes that his fellow soldier Eddie is "solid black but he's okay. I never knew a nigger that quiet. He's not a show-off" (202). In his next diary entry Dwayne declares, "if I saw a gook and didn't have any ammo, I'd take a cig. and twist it in his eyes and burn 'em out" (202). By juxtaposing these passages, Mason demonstrates how easily Dwayne's racism toward African-Americans is shifted to the Vietnamese, and she suggests how racism in the U.S. contributed to the brutal conduct of American soldiers in Indochina. Mason also shows that this racism persisted--Sam overhears a man's joking question as to how one is to know "if a nigger's born a blue baby" (96), and she listens to a late-night radio talk show where "college students called in their opinions on world issues. Several of them called up in favor of the Ku Klux Klan, denying it was violent," while most of the others insisted the callers "'have a right to their opinion'" (151). The racist culture that shaped Dwayne and his fellow soldiers and that aided them in dehumanizing the Vietnamese, Mason reveals, persists in Hopewell nearly twenty years later.

And it is this--the notion that little was changed by the war (except for the lives of veterans and their families) that is the central focus of In Country. The same kind of patriotism and adolescent alienation that sent Ca-

puto off to war causes Sam's boyfriend Lonnie to declare, "if America needs defending, then I couldn't stand back, could I?" Such beliefs have prevailed in Hopewell for generations, as Lonnie's father makes clear, saying, "My daddy and his daddy both fought, and I felt like I missed out on something important" (86). While recognizing the continuity of military service within a community like Hopewell, though, Mason shows how this militarism is promoted by American culture.

Frequently in In Country Mason shows how the war has been reinterpreted through its representations in popular culture. In fact, Sam's perceptions regularly are filtered through popular entertainment. Her trip to Washington with Emmett and her grandmother to see the Vietnam Veterans Memorial reminds her "of that Chevy Chase movie about a family on vacation" (4). Her drunken sexual fumbblings with veteran Tom Hudson (to whom she is attracted because of his likeness to Bruce Springsteen) was "like a familiar scene in a movie, the slow-motion sequence with the couple rolling in the sheets" (126). And Emmett's tale of being left for dead amidst a pile of corpses is "familiar. . . . [like] something . . . in a movie on TV" (223).

Generally, Sam's historical knowledge is framed by commercial culture. Watergate "was a TV series one summer" (67). And the 1960s are apprehended almost exclu-

sively through popular music.<sup>12</sup> Sam listens to 60s music as if it will unlock the secrets of that era and of the war: "The radio played several sixties songs, and she listened to all the words, trying not to lose any" (140). At one point she hears a previously unreleased Beatles' song, "Leave My Kitten Alone," and feels "it was eerie, like voices from the grave. . . . the energy of the sixties, like desire building and exploding" (51-52). "Sam had to find that record," Mason writes, "She wanted to play it for everyone she loved. It was a fresh message from the past, something to go on" (125). It is primarily through such cultural products that Sam attempts to understand the war, to make sense of her father's death and Emmett's suffering, and to construct her own identity.

One difficulty Sam has in reconstructing the war is that it has been so thoroughly commodified. Thus Mason tells us that Sam wishes "she had camouflage pants. . . . They were in style" (91). And we see Emmett and girlfriend Anita play a video game, Chopper Command, "Their laughter . . . mingl[ing] with the bursts of electronic gunfire" (102). But the most significant commercial reconstruction of the war in In Country is the TV show M\*A\*S\*H, which Sam and Emmett watch nearly every evening. The very perception of her father's death, for Sam, is connected to this sitcom. Mason writes that after watching the episode in which Colonel Blake died, Sam "went around stunned for days." To Sam, Colonel Blake's death

was more real . . . than the death of her own father. Even on the repeats, it was unsettling. Each time she saw that episode, it grew clearer that her father had been killed in a war. (25)

Likewise, because Emmett notes that Frank Burns is like his C.O. in Vietnam and because "That was about all Emmett would say about Vietnam" (25), Sam views M\*A\*S\*H for what it may reveal about the war. Sam is critical of the show, recognizing that "On M\*A\*S\*H sometimes, things were too simple" (83), yet when Emmett seems on the verge of emotional collapse, Sam "thought he was going to come out with some suppressed memories of events as dramatic as that one that caused Hawkeye to crack up in the final episode of M\*A\*S\*H" (222). Mason dramatizes Sam's persistent and often frustrated attempts to escape popular reconstructions of the war. At the same time she shows how pervasive is the commodification of history within American culture, a culture, writes Philip Melling, "in which the narratives of the market provide the sole inspiration for the myths of the community and a major resource for its social conversation" (154).

Mason shows how popular culture and prevailing ideologies converge to promote elite interests, in this case historical revisionism and remilitarization. From the opening sentence of the book's main narrative, Mason suggests how popular culture circa 1984 mirrored and exacer-

bated the jingoism and triumphalism of Reagan's America.

"It was the summer," she writes,

of the Michael Jackson Victory tour and the Bruce Springsteen Born in the U.S.A. tour. . . . At [Sam's] graduation, the commencement speaker, a Methodist minister, had preached about keeping the country strong, stressing sacrifice. (23)

Sam notes these details because they suggest the resurgent militarism of 1980s America. In the minister's stress on sacrifice she hears not a commonplace Christian sentiment but a harbinger of wartime loss in pursuit of Reagan-era foreign policy goals. We see here one of the strengths of Mason's narrative--her use of a limited third-person point-of-view that allows us to read the culture through Sam's eyes. Mason sketches in the background clutter of America culture that a bright 17-year-old would be aware of but would be unable, in first-person narration, to explain with any clarity. The piece-meal understanding conveyed through In Country reflects the fragmented nature both of an adolescent consciousness and a mass-mediated culture.

To achieve an understanding of the war, Sam must struggle against not only its cultural reinterpretation but a widespread desire to repress and deny this history. Throughout Sam's life, her mother, Irene, has refused to talk about the war. When years earlier they received a

copy of Newsweek with a cover picture of a Vietnamese woman carrying a dead baby, Irene "snatched it out of Sam's hands and ripped the cover off and burned it" (169). Irene's excuse for refusing to discuss this history is that she "can't live in the past. It was all such a stupid waste. There's nothing to remember" (168). To which Sam declares, "You want to pretend the whole Vietnam War never existed" (167). Likewise, despite much evidence to the contrary, including Sam's comment that "it was a stupid war . . . fifty-eight thousand guys. . . . died for nothing," Dwayne's mother (called "Mamaw" by Sam) finds comfort in the belief that "Dwayne was fighting for a cause. . . . he believed in his country, and he was ready to go over there and fight" (197). And when Sam's conversation turns to Lonnie's desire to join the military, his mother says, "I can't bear to think about boys going off to war," at which point she shifts topics, telling Sam, "I've got to show you this spice rack I'm giving Jennifer" (86). Whereas Sam's mother denies the past in order to forget her tragedy and to protect her daughter, Lonnie's mother does so because of what it portends for her son's future. In both cases, these women actively repress the suffering associated with the Vietnam War.

Whatever lessons might have been learned from the war thus are frequently ignored by the citizens of Hopewell. As Tom explains,

You might as well just stop asking questions about the war. Nobody gives a shit. They've got it twisted around in their heads what it was about, so they can live with it and not have to think about it.  
(79)

Set in the year of the Los Angeles Olympics, the Statue of Liberty centennial, and Reagan's "morning in America" campaign, In Country demonstrates how thoroughly the history of the war has been twisted by nationalist myth and ritual to promote support for future U.S. military interventions.

With diligence and a willingness to challenge conventional belief, however, someone like Sam can learn much about the war that does not easily cohere with the reigning mythos. A 17-year-old with limited access to information, Sam is able to place the war within the context of anti-colonialism, linking "old colonial countries like Ceylon and the Belgian Congo. Vietnam and Indochine" (51). She knows about the domino theory (102), the Phoenix Program (107), and My Lai (78). In a discussion with one veteran's wife, she even learns that "some of the [veterans] cut off the ears of the enemy for souvenirs" (123).

Lonnie has access to much the same information. In his contact with Emmett particularly Lonnie learns that the U.S. exposed servicemen to defoliants then denied them compensation and treatment. But Lonnie does not seek to learn about the war; nor does he draw conclusions from



Emmett's physical and emotional suffering. Sam recognizes that Lonnie had "admiration for Emmett because he had been to war, not because he had become a hippie and turned against the war." Lonnie, Sam realizes, "was just like all the other kids at school. In her history class last year, 90 percent voted in favor of the invasion of Grenada. They were afraid of the Russians" (88). Unlike her classmates, Sam--because of her study of history and her personal experience with the human consequences of American militarism--is attuned to the hollowness of nationalist rhetoric and is critical of government motive. She recognizes that "Reagan wants to go to war" (18). And when Lonnie declares his willingness to defend America, Sam asks, "Would you rather go to Lebanon or Nicaragua?" (185).

Sam likewise is aware of the connection between war and class exploitation. Throughout the novel we see the characters' class consciousness. Dwayne's mother, Mamaw, admits, "I'm still so embarrassed, spilling dirt on Irene's nice floor. I guess she thought I was just a country hick, dragging in dirt" (6). Lonnie's parents are excited because his brother is "marrying that hoity-toity girl from Bowling Green. . . . [whose] daddy has a Jerry's franchise" (69). Sam tells Emmett not to tape plastic on the windows because that "is what poor people do" (108). Mamaw's daughter, Donna, raves about her sister-in-law who

"has everything you can name. . . . a video-cassette recorder and a bedroom suit that cost a thousand dollars. She doesn't think a thing about eating out" (195).

In addition, we see the limited economic and educational opportunities available to the residents of Hopewell:

Emmett did most of his shopping at yard sales. All their stuff was junk. She felt empty and disappointed. Lonnie didn't have a job, and he wasn't going to college. Sam had worked at the Burger Boy after school for two years. (29)

Laid off his job at a farm equipment plant and having quit his job as a bag boy at Krogers, Lonnie now has only vain ambitions to "have my own business someday. . . . something outdoors, where I'm my own boss" (27). Decent jobs for working-class kids like Lonnie--at a nearby chemical plant and a cookie factory--are unavailable. These circumstances make Lonnie especially vulnerable to the allure of the military, as his mother plainly recognizes, declaring, "If you don't get a job, you'll end up in the Army, and I'll worry myself sick" (86).

The poverty and lack of opportunity in Hopewell, along with an ignorance born of social isolation and cultural homogeneity, have made military life attractive to generations of young men like Lonnie. Emmett, for instance, knew little "when he went into the Army. He

thought it would be just like killing squirrels. . . . He was just a country boy" (171), while Dwayne "was a mama's boy. . . . He was a good boy" (196). As Irene explains to Sam, "You look at those names [on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial] and tell me if they're not mostly country boy names. Boys who didn't know their ass from their elbow" (236). Hopewell "had sent dozens of boys to the war. One class had three killed in just two months" (112).<sup>13</sup> Christian Appy's demographic study of American armed forces in Vietnam confirms Mason's observations. According to Appy, among American troops in Vietnam there was a "disproportionate number of soldiers from rural towns" (23). "Vietnam," Appy writes, "more than any other American war in the twentieth century, perhaps in our history, was a working-class war" (Appy 6). Through economic dependence, nationalist propaganda, educational deficiencies, and heroic tradition, boys like Lonnie, Emmett, and Dwayne are made victims of America's imperial ambitions. Considering all these pressures to serve, Mamaw is correct when she responds to Sam's suggestion that Dwayne could have gone to Canada by declaring, "People don't have choices like that" (197).

More than the other books I have examined, In Country depicts the war as a form of class exploitation. Mason is insightful when discussing how the lessons of this war have been revised to accord with a resurgent nationalism.

For all its strengths, however, In Country is a novel that documents the suffering of American servicemen and their families without serious consideration for the Vietnamese. Both the strengths and the limitations of In Country are revealed by Mason's treatment of Agent Orange. Mason details Emmett's side-effects--chloracne, severe headaches, depression. She shows how it has affected other veterans: one man had "a place . . . on [his] leg, all brown and funny" (47); another "had every symptom in the book. . . . Nausea, the runs, jaundice, chloracne. His muscles twitch and he can't sleep and he's lost weight." And she shows how exposure to Agent Orange can lead to birth defects, describing a child who needs surgery to "rerout her intestines somehow to keep 'em from twisting so bad" (111). Mason also discusses the government's continuing refusal to acknowledge the harm caused by Agent Orange.

Nonetheless, her concentration on the consequences of American servicemen's accidental exposure to Agent Orange ignores the more widespread and severe consequences experienced by the Vietnamese. These consequences were identified by Dr. Tom That Tung, head of a team of North Vietnamese physicians investigating the "clinical effects of the use of herbicides and defoliants on the civilian population" (Dux 182). Statistics compiled over a twenty year period by Dr. Tung reveal that

1. In 1953 there was about a 1 per cent still-birth rate in Vietnam. By 1967 it had more than doubled.
2. In 1953 miscarriages ran at 1 per cent. In 1967 they reached 15 per cent.
3. In 1953 there was no recorded evidence that a child without a brain had ever been born in Vietnam. In 1967 one in every one hundred children suffered this fate.
4. In 1953 there was a 1 per cent unformed fetus rate. By 1967 this had risen to 5 per cent. (Dux 188-89).

Besides causing such ghastly human suffering, the spraying of defoliants devastated the ecology of Vietnam. The Vietnamese government has estimated that spraying occurred on over 70 per cent of coconut orchards and 60 per cent of rubber plantations and has destroyed about 44 per cent of all forests and 43 per cent of the country's rice crops (Dux 196). In In Country this history is absent and, in fact, has been transformed into a lingering American problem. Agreeing with a bumper sticker she sees that reads, "SPRAYED AND BETRAYED" (46), Sam is outraged that "the United States poisoned its own soldiers" (87).

The most significant problem with In Country, however, is its conclusion. Here Mason takes Sam, Emmett, and Mamaw to Washington to find the names of their loved ones on the wall. Mason chooses these characters because they represent the three generations--veterans, veterans' parents, and veterans' children--most affected by the war. At the memorial Mamaw is able to make a final gesture of devotion and departure--"She touches [Dwayne's] name, run-

ning her hand over it, stroking it tentatively, affectionately" (243). Ultimately, she is comforted and tells Sam,

Coming up on this wall of a sudden . . . it was so awful, but then I came down in it and saw that white carnation blooming out of that crack and it gave me hope. It made me know [Dwayne's] watching over us. (245)

Sam, too, achieves a sense of purpose at the wall. She finds her own name--Sam A. Hughes--touches it, and recognizes "How odd it feels, as though all the names in America have been used to decorate this wall" (245). Sam is beginning to realize she is not alone in her suffering; she is one of many victims of the war.

Emmett also begins to move out of the shadow of the war. The very trip to Washington energized him: "He was so definite about it. . . . Sam had never seen him swing into action like that" (230). Throughout the novel Mason uses Emmett's obsession with repairing a leaky basement to suggest his instability. "My basement's flooded and my foundation's weak," Emmett admitted, "And my house might fall down while I'm here" (110). Therefore, it is significant that at the memorial we see a workman "patching up a hole or something," which causes Sam to remember the Beatles lyric "Fixing a hole where the rain gets in [to stop my mind from wandering]" (241). Thus according to the book's figurative logic, this trip to the wall is

therapeutic; it helps Emmett recover, helps him maintain his mental and emotional stability. Like all pilgrimages, this trip offers a ritual and communal healing. In fact, the wall offers hope to all Vietnam veterans. So when Sam wishes Tom could be with them, the usually laconic and cynical Emmett replies, "He'll make it here someday. Jim's coming too. They're all coming one of these days" (241).

The novel ends with an almost allegorical coming together of three generations of Americans who recognize their shared suffering, their shared humanity. Through this communal ritual, through confronting the human costs of and recognizing our connection to the war and to each other, Mason suggests, America may begin to heal its wounds and move forward. As Thomas Myers notes, the trip to Washington is "a necessary rite that links generations, engenders expiation and understanding, and begins to write a meaningful peace" (224). Like the memorial itself, though, Mason's conclusion is equivocal. Despite many signs of affirmation and resolution, the novel concludes with Mamaw asking, "Did we lose Emmett?" To which Sam responds by pointing to Emmett "studying the names low on a panel. He is sitting there cross-legged in front of the wall, and slowly his face bursts into a smile like flames" (245). This passage may be read optimistically. A contemplative Emmett smiles brilliantly, as if enlightened,

gaining wisdom and peace after long suffering. But this passage also conveys Emmett's continued distress. He may be smiling, but it is a destructive, consumptive smile that evokes Buddhist monks' self-immolation. On this reading, the conclusion of In Country refigures Vietnamese sacrifice, transforming a monk's ultimate protest against the American invasion into the post-war suffering of an American invader. Ultimately, we are left with Mamaw's question--did we lose Emmett (and countless other veterans)? Despite differences in political sensibilities, there is a rough similarity between Mason's final concern and the concerns of Singlaub, et al. We remain focused on American suffering, on the loss of American servicemen, on the fracturing of American society.

Mason's conclusion, therefore, contributes to the revising of the war as an American tragedy. There is little evidence in either In Country or A Rumor of War of the devastation experienced by the peoples of Indochina at the hands of the U.S, little recognition that were a monument built to list the names of the Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians killed in the war, it would be 40 times longer than the Vietnam Memorial. Had the U.S. lost the same portion of its population, the memorial would list not 57 thousand but 8 million names (Appy 17).

As with Vietnam War novels and memoirs generally, American literary culture, in its responses to A Rumor of



War and In Country, has been unconcerned with these important (and ideologically useful) omissions and misrepresentations. Reviewers and critics have reinforced a liberal interpretation of the war as a singularly American calamity. Myers uncritically notes that "Caputo's Vietnam is less a military or political struggle than it is an American tragedy" (90). What makes the war especially tragic is that it sprang from good intentions. Thus to Theodore Solotaroff, "Caputo has revealed the broken idealism and suppressed agony of America's involvement." Solotaroff goes on to describe the war as a "nightmare of horror and waste," while to William Styron, Caputo is "a decent man sunk into a dirty time" (6). It is not coincidental that Solotaroff and Styron use imagery identical to O'Brien's in The Things They Carried. Since their criticism of the war is similarly constrained by a liberal ethos that maintains a benign motivation behind U.S. policy, they see the war ahistorically as waste and horror, the product not of U.S. imperialism but of "a dirty time."

This ahistoricism and ethnocentrism is apparent as well in the critical reception of In Country. Mason's attempts to address some of the political/historical issues raised by the war are either attacked or ignored by critics. Thus Michiko Kakutani declares Emmett's possible contamination with Agent Orange "a blunt, obvious metaphor for the insidious consequences of Vietnam." Ignoring the

all too real suffering of veterans, Kakutani focuses on the metaphorical nature of Emmett's exposure, thereby demonstrating the persistence of formalist ahistoricism within mass media literary culture. Seeking stylistic and narrative originality, Jonathan Yardley likewise complains of the book's "dreary familiarity." Ignoring her consistent critique of the exploitation of notions like heroism and sacrifice, he asserts that Mason presents at least one indisputable point--"that the honor [veterans] have lately received is long overdue."

A more subtle demonstration of the consensus ideology that typifies American literary culture can be found in the academic responses to Mason's novel, many of which have focused on feminist interpretations. Rather than read In Country as a critique of the commodification of history or of the persistence of class exploitation within rural America, Katherine Kinney declares it "a novel explicitly about a woman trying to comprehend an experience which 'men say' she by definition of her gender cannot understand" (40). To Kinney, Mason deconstructs the gendered conception of war, revealing "the simultaneous existence of difference and sameness" and "illustrat[ing] that self and other, male and female are not static, absolute terms but multiple, interactive constructions" (47). And to Susan Jeffords, In Country "confirms collectivity as a function of the masculine bond" (62), while Sam's

character "embodies challenges to a masculine collectivity from women" (64). For Milton J. Bates, however, In Country reaffirms, "with a dose of conscious irony, a version of the feminine mystique" (29). Unlike Kinney and Jeffords, Bates faults In Country for "not us[ing] war to challenge conventional notions of manhood and womanhood" and for failing to "question the assumption that women are by nature the nurterers of life and the men the takers of life" (55). Sexual politics, particularly the connection between war and masculinity, is an important concern in In Country, but the fact that literary critics have consistently discussed this issue without addressing the novel's examination of class exploitation (and its omission of the Vietnamese) is evidence of the ideological limitations implicit within contemporary academic literary criticism.

In the writings of novelists and autobiographers, critics and reviewers, an entire body of history--the Vietnamese experience--has been excised from literary representations of the war. To read a rare account of this experience, such as Martha Hess's oral history Then the Americans Came, is to discover just how destructive the war was for the Vietnamese and how misleading its literary retelling has been. In the tales recounted by Hess we hear of the destruction of villages and the obliteration of whole sections of urban communities, of families who lost eight and ten and twelve members, of countless hours

and days spent underground to escape American bombings, of the many rapes committed by American troops, of disfigurement and amputation, of a persistent lack of food and medical supplies, of the slaughter of farm animals and unarmed peasants. And we hear repeated questions, like these asked by Cau Ngoc Xuan, questions that Vietnam War literature has rarely addressed:

Why did the Americans come to destroy us and make war, and why don't they help now to rebuild our country? . . . Why did the Americans come here to destroy homes and kill people? . . . if I came to your land to destroy and burn your houses, how would you feel? (qtd. in Hess 43)

## Notes

1. Bush qtd. in Wiegman 174; Nguyen Than Kiem qtd. in Hess

2. For an influential telling of this myth see Monika Jensen-Stevenson and William Stevenson, Kiss the Boys Goodbye: How the United States Betrayed Its Own POWs in Vietnam. For a detailed history and refutation, see H. Bruce Franklin, M.I.A. or Mythmaking in America.

3. These figures grossly overestimate the number of missing American servicemen. As H. Bruce Franklin explains, after the 1973 Peace Agreement,

all but 53 men . . . were either released or reported to have died in captivity. In the next three years, intensive analysis of these remaining cases resolved all but a handful. . . . In the ensuing years, exhaustive case-by-case investigation together with the absence of contradictory evidence, has led the Department of Defense to make a presumptive finding of death for every single person in the combined POW/MIA total except one. . . . [who] is merely "listed as a prisoner of war as a symbolic gesture of the Administration's commitment to this issue." (14)

Besides fabricating "a shocking and tragic fact" about Americans missing in action, Singlaub and other proponents of the MIA myth are oblivious to the Vietnamese who remain missing--a number estimated at 300,000 (Hess 9).

4. Truong My Hoa details her experience in Con Son:

I was imprisoned in Con Son from 1964 to 1975. . . .  
I attended meetings and went to demonstrations to

demand freedom and democracy. The South Vietnamese arrested me when I was nineteen, and I was thirty by the time I was released. . . . We were beaten and tortured. They had all kinds of sexual torture for women. And we were so hungry. . . . And flies, flies everywhere. Con Son was filthy and cold, a stone prison on a cold, windy island. . . . We had one set of clothing a year. We never went outside, never bathed. We tore rags off our clothing for our menstrual periods, so that we were left with practically nothing to cover our bodies. There were all kinds of disease--dysentery, typhoid, cholera, malaria small pox. (qtd. in Hess 85)

5. Neither Buchanan nor Singlaub, however, has neglected geopolitics. In the M.I.A. Hunter series Buchanan's hero journeys to Nicaragua, the Soviet Union, Libya, Miami, and Watts. A long-time cold warrior, Singlaub was head of the World Anti-Communist League and chairman of the U.S. Council for World Freedom, which was chartered in 1981 to aid "freedom fighters around the world," in particular the Nicaraguan contras (Kornbluh 32).

6. Like O'Brien in "The Man I Killed," Caputo humanizes the Viet Cong only after they are dead. He goes through their personal effects, "a small packet of letters and photographs. . . . several wallet-sized pictures of girl friends or wives." Only at this moment and only temporarily does Caputo "realize that the Viet Cong were flesh and blood instead of . . . mysterious wraiths" (117).

7. Not surprisingly, when viewed through American soldiers' cultural/historical reference, this primitive enemy

with a close and almost mystical union with nature, is linked to Indians. Viet Cong-controlled territory, to Caputo, is "Indian country" (102), "true Indian country" (104). (Caputo's second book likewise is titled Indian Country.) Upon arriving in Vietnam with his fellow marines, Caputo writes, "The wagon train was surrounded and the cavalry had come to the rescue" (53). Richard Slotkin demonstrates the prevalence of the frontier myth in Vietnam War discourse, pointing, among many other examples, to a Saturday Evening Post article comparing the strategic hamlet program with the "stockade idea our ancestors used against the Indians"; to Maxwell Taylor defending this program by declaring that "It is very hard to plant corn outside the stockade when the Indians are still around" (qtd. in Gunfighter 495); to one veteran's assertion that cutting off the ears of dead Viet Cong was "like scalps, you know, like Indians. Some people were on an Indian trip over there" (qtd. in Fatal 17). Similarly, Richard Drinnan points to the names of American air and ground operations: "'Rolling Thunder'; 'Prairie'; 'Sam Houston'; 'Hickory'; 'Daniel Boone'; and 'Crazy Horse'" (450). Frances Fitzgerald explains the process by which Americans saw the Vietnamese as Indians and themselves as cowboys:

The Americans were once again embarked upon a heroic and (for themselves) almost painless conquest of an inferior race. To the American settlers the defeat of the Indians had seemed not just a nationalist vic-

tory, but an achievement made in the name of humanity--the triumph of light over darkness, of good over evil, of civilization over brutish nature. Quite unconsciously, the American officers and officials used a similar language to describe their war against the NLF. (491)

8. Nearly identical points were made by Major General Thomas J.H. Trapnell, Jr. as early as 1954. To Trapnell

The battle of Indochina is an armed revolution which is now in its eighth year. It is a savage conflict fought in a fantastic country in which the battle may be waged one day in waist-deep muddy rice paddies or later in an impenetrable mountainous jungle. The sun saps the vitality of friend and foe alike, but particularly the European soldier. (qtd. in Drinnan 405)

9. In Heart of Darkness Conrad makes a similar point about the inefficacy of Western technology. "In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water," he writes, was a French man-of-war,

incomprehensible, firing into a continent. Pop, would go one of the six-inch guns; a small flame would dart and vanish, a little white smoke would disappear, a tiny projectile would give a futile screech--and nothing happened. Nothing could happen. (41)

Behind Conrad and Caputo's talk of futile screeches and gourds and rattles, of course, lay the brutal record of the colonial powers in Africa and the devastation of the American war in Indochina.



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10. Richard Drinnan sees the frontier myth, with its genocidal and racist ethos, as a determining factor in the history of American foreign policy. To Drinnan, at each new frontier

[white settlers'] metaphysics of Indian-hating underwent a seemingly confirmatory "perennial rebirth." Rooted in fears and prejudices buried deep in the Western psyche, their metaphysics became a time-tested doctrine, an ideology, and an integral component of U.S. nationalism. (463-64)

11. Westmoreland made a similar comparison when justifying American military policy in Vietnam. He asserted that

If you crowd in too many termite killers, each using a screwdriver to kill the termites, you risk collapsing the floors or the foundation. In this war we're using screwdrivers to kill termites because it's a guerilla war and we cannot use bigger weapons. We have to get the right balance of termite killers to get rid of the termites without wrecking the house. (qtd. in Fitzgerald 460)

Similarly, Fitzgerald explains how,

According to the official rhetoric, the Viet Cong did not live in places, they 'infested areas'; to 'clean them out' the American forces went on 'sweep and clear' operations or moved all the villagers into refugee camps in order to 'sanitize the area.' (492)

12. Among the 60s era musicians mentioned in In Coun-

try are Junior Walker and the All Stars, Sam the Sham and the Pharoahs, the Mamas and the Papas, the Doors, the Beatles, the Kinks, the Animals, Marvin Gaye, Bob Dylan, Grace Slick, Mick Jagger, John Lennon, and Donovan.

13. It is interesting to compare this loss with the casualties suffered by the Vietnamese (and overlooked by Mason and other Vietnam War writers). Here are several Vietnamese describing the war's deadly consequences:

I had one friend--ten people in her family, eight died. . . . Some days, twelve, thirteen, fourteen people were killed. . . . There were fourteen people in my family, and now there are only four. . . . Six people were killed in one family, and they couldn't even find the pieces. . . . In one family a mother and her four children were killed. Only their father--he had no legs because he was wounded during the French time--was away from the house. (qtd. in Hess 25-49)

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